Al-Mīzān

An Exegesis of the Qur'an

al-ʿAllāmah al-Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Ṭabāṭabāʾī

Translated by: Tawus Raja

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In the Name of Allah,
the Beneficent, the Merciful.

All praise is due to Allah, the Lord of the Worlds;
the Beneficent, the Merciful;
the Master of the Day of Judgment;
Thee only we serve, and to Thee alone we beseech
for help;
Guide us in the straight path;
The path of those upon whom Thou hast bestowed
favors,not of those against whom Thou art
wrathful, nor of those who are astray.

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O' Allah! send Your blessings to the head of
Your messengers and the last of
Your prophets,
Muḥammad and his pure and cleansed progeny.
Also send Your blessings to all Your
prophets and envoys.

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Arabic Transliteration Key

Arabic Letters	Transliteration	Arabic Letters	Transliteration
ا	ā	ع	ʿ
ب	b	غ	gh
ت	t	ف	f
ث	th	ق	q
ج	j	ك	k
ح	ḥ	ل	l
خ	kh	م	m
د	d	ن	n
ذ	dh	ه	h
ر	r	و	w/ū
ز	z	ى	y/ī
س	s	ء	ʾ
ش	sh	ة	-
ص	ṣ	ـَ	a
ض	ḍ	ـِ	i
ط	ṭ	ـُ	u
ظ	ẓ		

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Publisher's Note

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In an effort to make the text more accessible to English-speaking readers, the editors have chosen to use English names for the prophets and figures (as listed below but not limited to) and to use Anglicized terms that now appear in English dictionaries.

Ādam	Adam	Moses	Moses
Dāwūd	David	Sulaymān	Solomon
Hārūn	Aaron	Shuʿayb	Jethro
Ibrāhīm	Abraham	Yaʿqūb	Jacob
ʿĪsā	Jesus	ʾAyyūb	Job
Isḥāq	Isaac	Yūshaʿ	Joshua
Ismāʿīl	Ishmael	Yūsuf	Joseph
Jibrāʾīl	Gabriel	Zakariyyā	Zachariah
Mary	Mary		

Arabic terms and names have been transliterated according to the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (*IJMES*).

For ease of reading, glyphs and traditional honorifics such as "peace be upon him" or (s.a.w.) which are commonly used as a gesture of respect after the name of the Prophet Muhammad, the Imams, or other sacred figures have been omitted from this text. No disrespect is intended, and may God's peace and blessings be upon them all!

Foreword

The English volumes 15 and 16 are translations of the Arabic volume 8 of *al-Mīzān*, which covers Sūrah al-Aʿrāf (chapter 7) of the Qur'an. Some students of the author and some teachers of *tafsīr* have identified this part as the peak of *al-Mīzān*. Interested readers are sometimes advised to start with this volume because it bears many principal discussions that equip the reader with the essential tools in *tafsīr*. Having learnt how to fish, the student of Qur'an can explore the other parts of this ocean more independently, and enjoy more fulfilling catches. Volume 1, on the other hand, could deter some readers by some of its intricate discussions.

Early in this sūrah, we read the story of Adam's creation, which is also found at the beginning of the Bible, and in the early pages of the Qur'an in Sūrah al-Baqarah. In volume 15, the author presents some in-depth discussions on some topics including: the devil, the *ṭīnah* (clay, substance), felicity and wretchedness, and the divine Throne. In volume 16, He analyzes Prophet Moses' request to "see" God, the primordial covenant of all humankind with their Lord, and the significance of the divine names.

The author does not hesitate to challenge and clarify common superficial understandings of the Qur'an and hadith. He points out their inner inconsistencies, and offers an ingenious alternative reading that is supported by both scriptural and rational evidence. He extracts from the Qur'an and hadith rational principles and conclusions that can also be presented to, and appreciated by, non-Muslims. Despite his Islamic terminology, his profound discussions can be a basis for conducting a meaningful dialogue with other schools and traditions, whether religious or not.

One example of this is his discussions on the human soul and its knowledge of God under verses 7:143 and 7:172 in volume 16. He provides some thought-provoking principles that are not to be found in the works of almost any Muslim scholar. He first points out our inner sense of *need* which is inseparable from any aspect of our existence. Then he equates the realization of this need with the realization of the substratum which sustains it. This is an intuitive knowledge of the Infinite Source of existence, which is inseparable from us, just like our need. This kind of knowledge is neither mental nor metaphorical; nor is it something to be

acquired through books and schooling.

A major theme that runs through this entire sūrah is the concept of God's *āyah* (pl. *āyāt*), which literally means "sign." The Qur'an has a very broad definition of *āyah*. Anything that indicates God is an *āyah*. This would include His entire creation. All beings in existence—whether animate or inanimate, physical or non-physical, temporal or atemporal, pleasant or unpleasant, good or evil—are signs of the power, wisdom and mercy of their Creator. Any event that can turn our attention to the Absolute Reality which sustains and support it, is a sign of the divine. With this, it should also be clear why *āyah* is sometimes translated as "communication," and the verses of the Qur'an are called *āyāt*. God's communications include not only His Book of Legislation (*kitāb al-tadwīn*), but also His Book of Creation (*kitāb al-takwīn*). Any sign of God—which means anything that we encounter—bears a message for us. It is a "gift" from our Friend, intended to connect us back to Him.

In line with its emphasis on the "signs" of God, the sūrah also repeatedly highlights the concept of *dhikr* (remembrance, mindfulness, invocation). The meaning of *dhikr* is twofold. One side of it is almost identical to *āyah*, and can be translated as "reminder." The Qur'an is a reminder. All our trials and tribulations in life—including both ease and hardship—are reminders. The messages and miracles of the prophets, and the stories of their people, are all reminders.

The other side of *dhikr* is *our* remembrance and mindfulness of God, which is the purpose behind the first aspect of *dhikr*. That is our state of being conscious, as opposed to being heedless and inadvertent. It means penetrating the colors on the surface, and beholding the colorless Reality that runs through them all. It means breaking out of our endless mental drama, and observing every event as an expression of Being. It means transcending time, where we are no longer ensnared in thoughts about the past and the future, and choosing to experience the most current manifestation of Existence, which can only be found in this moment.

This is the sūrah's criterion for salvation. While God's universal mercy *embraces all things* (7:156), His particular mercy is *for those who are Godwary and give the alms and those who believe in Our signs* (7:156). On the other hand: *Certainly We have created for hell many of the jinn and humans… It is they who are the heedless* (7:179). Being heedless means going through life behind a veil of illusion, and living in a mode of separation.

That amounts to self-caused suffering, which is the reality of hell. In contrast, God's particular mercy—which is the same as paradise and bliss (*ananda*)—is for those who see everything as a sign of God, and thus pierce through pluralities to reach oneness. The Qur'an says elsewhere: *Remember Allah much, so that you may be felicitous* (8:45, 62:10). This was also a salient feature of the author's life and character: the highest virtue to him was *murāqabah*, which can be translated as both "meditation" and "mindfulness": the former being the practice, and the latter being the result. In fact, *taqwá*, which is the highest and most comprehensive virtue in the Qur'an, can arguably and plausibly be translated as "mindfulness."

His attributes are many, but the essence is one;
The point is the same, but the expressions are a ton.
One must be aware to notice the King,
Regardless of the garment that He has put on.[1]

I would like to thank Dr. Amina Inloes for editing both volumes. I am also very indebted to Ali Khalfan, the director of Tawheed Institute, for his relentless, responsible and professional effort in coordinating this project, without demanding any recognition or reward for it. There are several other unsung heroes here, who have helped the project in a variety of ways, directly and indirectly. They remain anonymous, and their reward is with their Lord. While acknowledging the help of the crew, I bear full responsibility for any mistakes or shortcomings in this work.

It is narrated that the author dedicated the reward of writing *al-Mīzān* to the souls of his parents. Likewise, I dedicate the reward of my translation—if it is of any worth—to my parents. May God amplify their good deeds, overlook their sins, and resurrect them with the Qur'an and the one who brought it.

Tawus Raja
June 2018, Ramadan 1439
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1 ʿAṭṭār, *Manṭiq al-ṭayr*.

About the Author

The late Islamic scholar, thinker, and philosopher, ʿAllāmah al-SayyidMuḥammad Ḥusayn al-Ṭabāṭabāʾī came from the celebrated Ṭabāṭabāʾī family of Tabriz. For the last three centuries, this family has produced generation after generation of renowned religious scholars in Azerbaijan (Iran). They are descendants of the second Imam, al-Ḥasan b. ʿAlī (peace be on both of them). The clan is also referred to with the title, al-Qāḍī.

ʿAllāmah al-Ṭabāṭabāʾī was the son of al-Sayyid Muḥammad b. al-Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Ṭabāṭabāʾī. ʿAllāmah was born in Tabriz on 29 Dhū al-Ḥijjah 1321/17 March 1904. His father died in 1330 (1912). The orphaned child grew up in Tabriz, and after completing his religious education there, around 1341 (1923), he went to Najaf (Iraq), the most important center of Shia religious learning.

In Najaf, he began his higher studies with such illustrious scholars as Shaykh Muḥammad Ḥusayn Nāʾīnī al-Gharawī (1277–1355/1860 or 1861–1936), the son of Shaykh al-Islām ʿAbd al-Raḥīm, and Shaykh Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Gharawī al-Iṣfahānī (1296–1361/1878–1942), the son of al-Ḥājj Muḥammad Ḥasan, Muʿīn al-Tujjār.

These two were among the most prominent scholars in the Shia world. They were among the most prominent scholars not only in the fields of Shia jurisprudence and principles of jurisprudence, but in all Islamic subjects. Their opinions and theories are still followed today. Each founded his own school of thought and trained thousands of Shia scholars and jurists; and all the *marājiʿ al-taqlīd*[1] of the Shia world, to this day, are their students. Shaykh Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Gharawī al-Iṣfahānī was a philosopher, unsurpassed in his time; a man of literature; and a poet in Arabic and Persian; he was a genius whose achievements made others look up to him as their ideal. Shaykh Nāʾīnī, with his bold opinions and decrees in the political and social life of the Muslim *umma*, has carved for himself a niche in history.

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1 The highest authorities of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) whose rulings are followed by others.

ʿAllāmah al-Ṭabāṭabāʾī was much influenced by these two teachers, particularly by al-Iṣfahānī, in the development of his thought and knowledge. A third influence was that of al-Sayyid Abū al-Qāsim Jaʿfar Khwānsārī (1313– 80/1895 or 1896–1961), the son of al-Sayyid Muḥammad al-Mūsāwī, known as "the mathematician." ʿAllāmah al-Ṭabāṭabāʾī was proud to have studied mathematics with him, and also wrote a book on higher mathematics, in which he applied some special theories of his teacher.

ʿAllāmah studied philosophy and metaphysics from al-Sayyid Ḥusayn al-Ḥusaynī Bādkūbahʾī; the latter was a student of al-Sayyid Riḍā, who studied with al-Sayyid Mūsā, a well-known teacher of philosophy and related subjects. In the fields of ethics and spirituality, ʿAllāmah received his training from his relatives, al-Sayyid ʿAlī al-Qāḍī (1285–1366/1869–1947), a well-known scholar who established a school of spiritual and ethical training which still flourishes today.

All these influences combined to create in ʿAllāmah al-Ṭabāṭabāʾī a well-balanced academic and spiritual personality. He was a well-respected authority on religious subjects of jurisprudence and its fundamentals; a philosopher of independent views and new theories; and an inspired model of ethical and spiritual perfection. He not only taught morality, but also lived it. Yet it is also correct to state that his scholarship was overshadowed by his fame and prestige as a philosopher and a spiritual man.

ʿAllāmah al-Ṭabāṭabāʾī returned to Tabriz in 1353/1934, where he was welcomed as a religious scholar. There he spent his time teaching higher philosophy to willing disciples—but it was a small place for his talents. In 1364/1945 he migrated to Qum, the most important center of religious education in Iran. In Qum, he remained engaged in imparting the knowledge of ethics, philosophy, and the exegesis of the Qur'an to those students who had already attained a high level of erudition. There he remained until his death on Sunday, 18 Muḥarram 1402/15 November 1981. May God bestow His mercy on him. Amen.

Many religious leaders of the present generation were and are among his students and disciples, the most famous being the late Murtaḍā Muṭahharī (1338–99/1920–79).

ʿAllāmah al-Ṭabāṭabāʾī's fame rests on his academic works—the most important being his great exegesis of the Qur'an, *al-Mīzān fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān*. It is said to be the foundation stone of the academic prestige

which ʿAllāmah al-Ṭabāṭabāʾī was accorded in the Muslim world.

Among his other works is *Uṣūl-i falsafah va ravish-i riʾalism* [Practical and Philosophical Principles of Realism]. This book is a comparative study of Islamic philosophy and various modern anti-Islamic schools of thoughts, especially Marxism. His disciple, the late Murtaḍā Muṭahharī, annotated this work, thus making it easily accessible to the average man.

A third book, *Shiʿa dār Islām*, was first published in Persian; later it was published in English with the title, *Shiʾite Islam.* The ʿAllāmah wrote this book on the request of Professor Kenneth Morgan of Colgate University, to introduce Shiism to the West.

However, it is his *tafsīr, al-Mīzān* (published in 20 volumes in Arabic) which presents the true picture of the author's academic style and his way of thinking. In the preface to volume 1, the author outlines his plan, to explain the Qur'an with the help of the Qur'an itself. This he faithfully does, all the way through to the end of the *tafsīr*.

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Chapter 7

al-Aʿrāf

(The Elevations)

Verses 94-206

Verses 94-102

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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

وَ ما أَرْسَلْنا فِي قَرْيَةٍ مِنْ نَبِيٍّ إِلاَّ أَخَذْنا أَهْلَها بِالْبَأْساءِ وَ الضَّرَّاءِ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَضَّرَّعُونَ ﴿٩٤﴾ ثُمَّ بَدَّلْنا مَكانَ السَّيِّئَةِ الْحَسَنَةَ حَتَّى عَفَوْا وَ قالُوا قَدْ مَسَّ آباءَنَا الضَّرَّاءُ وَ السَّرَّاءُ فَأَخَذْناهُمْ بَغْتَةً وَ هُمْ لا يَشْعُرُونَ ﴿٩٥﴾ وَ لَوْ أَنَّ أَهْلَ الْقُرى آمَنُوا وَ اتَّقَوْا لَفَتَحْنا عَلَيْهِمْ بَرَكاتٍ مِنَ السَّماءِ وَ الْأَرْضِ وَ لكِنْ كَذَّبُوا فَأَخَذْناهُمْ بِما كانُوا يَكْسِبُونَ ﴿٩٦﴾ أَ فَأَمِنَ أَهْلُ الْقُرى أَنْ يَأْتِيَهُمْ بَأْسُنا بَياتاً وَ هُمْ نائِمُونَ ﴿٩٧﴾ أَ وَ أَمِنَ أَهْلُ الْقُرى أَنْ يَأْتِيَهُمْ بَأْسُنا ضُحًى وَ هُمْ يَلْعَبُونَ ﴿٩٨﴾ أَ فَأَمِنُوا مَكْرَ اللَّهِ فَلا يَأْمَنُ مَكْرَ اللَّهِ إِلاَّ الْقَوْمُ الْخاسِرُونَ ﴿٩٩﴾ أَ وَ لَمْ يَهْدِ لِلَّذِينَ يَرِثُونَ الْأَرْضَ مِنْ بَعْدِ أَهْلِها أَنْ لَوْ نَشاءُ أَصَبْناهُمْ بِذُنُوبِهِمْ وَ نَطْبَعُ عَلى قُلُوبِهِمْ فَهُمْ لا يَسْمَعُونَ ﴿١٠٠﴾ تِلْكَ الْقُرى نَقُصُّ عَلَيْكَ مِنْ أَنْبائِها وَ لَقَدْ جاءَتْهُمْ رُسُلُهُمْ بِالْبَيِّناتِ فَما كانُوا لِيُؤْمِنُوا بِما كَذَّبُوا مِنْ قَبْلُ كَذلِكَ يَطْبَعُ اللَّهُ عَلى قُلُوبِ الْكافِرِينَ ﴿١٠١﴾ وَ ما وَجَدْنا لِأَكْثَرِهِمْ مِنْ عَهْدٍ وَ إِنْ وَجَدْنا أَكْثَرَهُمْ لَفاسِقِينَ ﴿١٠٢﴾

(7:94) *We did not send a prophet to any town without visiting its people with misery and hardship so that they might entreat [Allah's forgiveness].*

(7:95) *Then We changed the evil for good until they multiplied [in numbers] and said, "Hardship and ease befell our fathers [too]." Then We seized them suddenly while they were unaware.*

(7:96) *If the people of the towns had been faithful and Godwary, We would have opened to them blessings from the heaven and the earth. But they denied; so We seized them because of what they*

used to earn.

(7:97) *So do the people of the towns feel secure from Our punishment overtaking them at night while they are asleep?*

(7:98) *Do the people of the towns feel secure from Our punishment overtaking them at midday while they are playing around?*

(7:99) *Do they feel secure from Allah's devising? No one feels secure from Allah's devising except the people who are losers.*

(7:100) *Has guidance not come for those who inherited the earth after its [former] inhabitants that if We will We would punish them for their sins, and set a seal on their hearts so they would not hear?*

(7:101) *These are the towns some of whose accounts We recount to you. Certainly their messengers brought them manifest proofs, but they were not to believe in what they had disbelieved earlier. Thus does Allah put a seal on the hearts of the faithless.*

(7:102) *And We did not find in most of them [loyalty to] any covenant. Indeed We found most of them to be transgressors.*

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Introduction

These verses are connected to the previous verses as they summarize the stories of the previous nations. Most of them were evil-doers who trespassed the limits of servitude and did not observe the covenant that God had made with them from day one. That was the reason why they were meted out with a particular sequence of divine customs as a punishment.

The first divine custom is that whenever God sends a prophet to a people, He tests and tries them with hardship and distress so that they may return to their Lord with humble entreaty. This has been one of God's customs throughout history. The people's custom, in response, has been to turn away from these signs of God, and not be awakened by His alerts.

Once the first stage proves ineffective [in guiding and awakening the people], God replaces it with another custom, where He hardens the hearts, seals them, diverts them from the truth, and binds them to carnal pleasures and material luxuries. This is called the divine custom of *makr* (plot, scheme, contrivance, ruse).

The third stage is the divine custom of *istidrāj* (gradual ruin through blessings). That is when God changes hardship to ease, punishment to bounty, and adversity to prosperity. By doing so, He leads them gradually

toward His punishment, day by day, and hour by hour, until it seizes them suddenly whence they least expect it. They are caught off guard because they were enjoying themselves in peace and security, were complacent about their share of knowledge, and were confident that their instruments and technologies could deflect anything that might threaten their existence.

In these verses, God mentions a clear criterion about when a bounty or a punishment is sent upon the human world: *If the people of the towns had been faithful and Godwary, We would have opened to them blessings from the heaven…* (7:96). To better understand this, we must realize that the world of existence is a single whole, with all its parts interconnected and interrelated. They can be compared to the different organs of a single body, where the wellness and strength of one part affects the work and functionality of the other parts. There is a general law of mutual interaction between the effects and properties of the different parts of the universe.[1]

According to the Qur'an, every part of this whole [that is, every member of the body of existence] is pursuing its course toward God, and is journeying toward a goal of perfection that has been assigned to it. Now, if a part of this whole—especially one of the central parts—stops functioning properly, becomes weak and deviates from its right path, it will affect the other members of existence negatively. Given the law of reciprocation between all parts of the universe, that negative impact will in turn come back to the dysfunctional unit. That will be in the form of some unpleasant condition and affliction, because of the initial unit's incongruity with the rest of existence. If that unit is aligned once again—either by itself or by external pressure—then it will reclaim the initial peaceful condition that it had. But if persists with its deviation, distortion and corruption, its affliction will continue. As it reaches a threshold and transgresses its limits, it starts jeopardizing its surrounding beings with corruption. At that point, the other members and units of existence will stand against it with a force that God has placed in them in order to maintain themselves. Thus they will crush, destroy and obliterate the noncomplying unit at once, whence it does not realize.

This is a universal law that God has placed in the world of existence.

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1 The word "universe" is etymologically significant here. It means "combined into one, made whole, having a single direction." (Trans.)

All beings and species are subject to this law, including humans. There are no exemptions. Consider any human society or nation that deviates from the path of its pristine nature and original makeup, in a way that stops it from pursuing the human perfection that has been set as a goal of its life. Such deviation will disrupt the state of other causes and forces in the world of existence which are directly connected to it. That will in turn reflect back to the deviant society in the form of a negative effect. The cause of all this is their deviation from the right path, and having a negative impact on their surroundings. That will give rise to a variety of large-scale problems in their interactions and across their society, such as moral decadence, hard-heartedness, loss of compassion, epidemics, and natural disasters. For instance, the sky will withhold its rain, the earth will withhold its crops, and there will be a high frequency of floods, hurricanes, thunderbolts, earthquakes, and so on. All these are divine signs that are meant to awaken humankind and induce the people to repent to their Lord and return to the straight path of their *fiṭrah* (primal nature, innate disposition, initial makeup). These are times of hardship which follow times of ease: both are tests and trials for the nations.

Consider the verse: *Corruption has appeared in land and sea because of the doings of the people's hands, that He may make them taste something of what they have done, so that they may come back* (30:41). This verse bears unequivocal evidence to what we said. It explains that the injustice and sins that are committed by the hands of the people result in corruption in the land and the sea. Corruption here is meant in a general sense, including: (1) disruptions that directly afflict humankind, such as war, hijacking, and lack of security; (2) disruptions that do not directly affect humankind, such as disturbances in the atmosphere or on the earth, which nevertheless harm human life.

There are other verses that convey the same meaning. One verse which is somewhat similar, and which we shall discuss later, is: *Whatever affliction that may visit you is because of what your hands have earned, and He excuses many [an offense]* (42:30). Another verse is: *Indeed Allah does not change a people's condition unless they change what is in themselves* (13:11).

If these afflictions cause the deviant nation to return to the right path, then they are set. But that has been very rare in human history. Otherwise, if they persist in their error and deviation, God will seal their hearts. That is when they feel accustomed to their condition. They will come to

accept that this is what makes up human life: a wretched unpeaceful life which is in constant friction with the other elements of the world, which is always crushed by natural disasters, and which has to undergo all sorts of calamities and afflictions. Thus, in their view, the job of humankind is to advance in science and technology in order to equip themselves with sufficient means and instruments to deflect the forces of nature and undo its workings. This is what we see today, where humanity has employed various techniques and sophisticated ways to safeguard itself against natural disasters and afflictions which threaten its existence, such as floods, hurricanes and thunderbolts, famine, drought, plague, pestilence and other contagious diseases.

Perish humankind! How ungrateful are they (80:17). They think that their advancements, which they call science and civilization, will dominate nature and cancel the laws of existence. They imagine that they can make the world succumb to their will, and follow their desires. But humans are themselves a member of this system, are subject to its laws, and are only an insignificant part of the whole. *Had the Truth followed their desires, the heavens and the earth would have surely fallen apart* (23:71). And if the world of existence were to fall apart, the weak human being would be among the first parts of it to decay, and would quickly wane toward destruction.

They [the unbelievers throughout the history] have misunderstood the message of religions. According to their impression, religions deny the link between natural events and their natural causes, and instead attribute these events to their "Creator." This dichotomous view implies that the Creator operates on the same plane as the other causes which have been discovered by science as governing forces in the universe. This makes God a "backup cause" that is responsible for other events for which there is no scientific explanation. Historically speaking, God was accorded meteorological processes and cosmic phenomena such as rain, thunderbolt, famine and plague. But as we humans have discovered the natural causes of these events, we have gradually come to imagine ourselves needless of the Lord of all worlds, and exempt from His direction of affairs.

What we, as humanity, have missed is that God is not a cause that is parallel to the other causes, and a force on the same plane as physical forces in nature. Rather, He is a reality which encompasses all things. He is the Creator of every cause, Who leads every cause from before and behind to

its effect.[1] He has given *everything its creation and then guided it* (20:50). The creation, function, and effect of every cause is under God's control, and no one else. Therefore, He can make any event occur through other causes that are unknown to us, as He wills.

There are many verses that refer to this point, such as: *Allah carries through His command. Certainly Allah has set a measure for everything* (65:3); *Allah prevails in His purpose, but most people do not know* (12:21); *You cannot thwart [Allah] on the earth, and you do not have besides Allah any guardian or helper* (42:31).

Can humankind possibly oppose God in His kingdom? Can they devise intelligent mechanisms to counter God's decree and will? How could that be possible when God is not positioned along the other forces horizontally, but He encompasses them vertically? That is, He is the Creator of not only humankind, but also their volition, their thoughts, and the mechanisms that they devise. He has placed everything where it belongs, and has positioned the series of causes and effects in a connected chain, all the way from the beginning to the end. His making extends to the final stage of the scientific and technological goals that humans seek, with which they wish to fight their Lord's decree and oppose His rule. People are themselves one of the hands with which God operates to implement His will and rule. They are part of the causal system which carry out the divine decree and destiny.[2]

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1 "From before and behind" means that God is present with every being, and active with every action, as opposed to the rudimentary deistic view of God as a retired architect or watchmaker. He is not merely positioned at the beginning of the chain. Every causation is an extension, expression and manifestation of His absolute causality. (Trans.)

2 In Islamic metaphysics, the key concept behind horizontality and verticality is "causality." A cause and its effect have a vertical (*ṭūlī*) relationship with one another. A metaphysical cause is what gives existence to the effect. The effect would not exist without the cause, nor would it fail to exist with it. Causes on the same level of existence have a horizontal (*ʿarḍī*) relationship with one another. The author's point here is that the entire system of causes and effects—including the natural and the supernatural—is an effect of God, and has a vertical relationship with Him. While two causes may rival one another horizontally, they cannot stand God's absolute causality. This is a subtle monotheistic worldview, which implies that there is only one ultimate

After talking about His custom of seizing the people with misery and hardship [7:94], God says: *Then We changed the evil for good until they multiplied [in numbers] and said, "Hardship and ease befell our fathers [too]." Then We seized them suddenly while they were unaware* (7:95). This verse refers exactly to the unfortunate state of humankind which we explained above. We shall clarify this more as we discuss the verse below, by God's will.

These verses describe a logical truth: just like the other species in the world, humankind is connected to the other parts of existence which surround them. In every stage of their life and journey toward eternal happiness, whatever they do is connected to other beings. If they act and live in harmony with the world of existence, then the world will also be harmonious to them, and the heavens will shower their blessings upon them. But if they decay and act corruptly, the world will also decay and will reciprocate in like manner. In that case, if the people cease their corruption and get back on track, things will go back to normal. But if they continue until they drown in their corruption, the world of existence will rebel against them, will destroy their foundations, will obliterate their signs, and will clear the earth from their defilement.

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cause, and that is God. All other causes and causations are only *relative*. If analyzed sufficiently, it becomes clear that they—in their entirety, including all their power, volition, planning and intelligence—are the workings of God. This is the correct interpretation of the Ashʿarite negation of causality, which is often misunderstood. They do not claim that there is no causality in the world whatsoever. They claim that there is no *real* causality in the world except for God's. All other causes are only *apparent* causes. Within the realm of nature and phenomena, they can certainly be called causes, and can be relied upon to have inseparable effects. But the whole message of religion is to expand our horizons and raise our eyes to see the wider picture. Compared to their Creator, all causes and effects are only facets of His doing, with different roles and positions assigned to them. There is no necessary link between any two events in the world, because no event is really a cause for another. This is the true and monotheistic sense of the Ashʿarite theory of divine *ʿādah* (custom, habit, practice): what seems to us as inviolable necessity is rather God's wont to create a certain phenomenon in a certain way. This is how mystically oriented Ashʿarites, like Rūmī, understood and interpreted the world. For more on vertical and horizontal relationships, see my footnote on volume 15 (1st ed.), pp. 56-57. (Trans.)

It is rather impossible for humankind to ever oppose the world of existence through any acts, because humans are not an independent entity from it, but are themselves a part of the world. Any intellectual plan or mechanism that they devise is itself based on general scientific laws that have been extracted from the universe. So how could humankind contrive against the universe? The reader should reflect on this.

This is a logical truth which the Qur'an confirms and states explicitly. According to the Qur'an, God is the One Who has created everything and has determined it in a precise measure [25:2]. He has guided everything to its means of perfection [20:50, 87:3]. He has not created the world in futility [75:36], nor any part of it—including humankind—for play [21:16, 44:38]. Rather, He has created whatever He has created so that it may eventually return to His proximity. He has prepared a state of bliss for everything, toward which it is guided through its *fiṭrah* (primal nature, innate disposition, initial makeup) with God's will. He has made a path for every being toward its happiness and perfection. If that being pursues its divinely intuitive path, then that is the goal. But if it deviates from it—in a way that cannot be retracted to the straight path—then its intended goal is wasted, and the divine decree of punishment applies to it.[1]

Commentary

وَ ما أَرْسَلْنا فِي قَرْيَةٍ مِنْ نَبِيٍّ إِلاَّ أَخَذْنا أَهْلَها بِالْبَأْساءِ وَ الضَّرَّاءِ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَضَّرَّعُونَ﴿٩٤﴾

(7:94) ***We did not send a prophet to any town without visiting its people with misery*** **(bil-baʾsāʾ)** ***and hardship*** **(al-ḍarrāʾ)** ***so that they might entreat [Allah's forgiveness].***

Some have said that *baʾsāʾ* means financial misfortune like poverty, while *ḍarrāʾ* means physical misfortune like illness. Others have said the opposite: *baʾsāʾ* means a hardship that afflicts themselves, while *ḍarrāʾ* means a hardship that afflicts their property. There are also other

1 This means that divine punishment is nothing but one's failure to reach the state of perfection that is intended for them. It is a privative state, where one is veiled from the Truth, and cannot penetrate the apparent multiplicities in order to realize their underlying oneness. (Trans.)

interpretations for the two terms. Some have said that *baʾs* and *baʾsāʾ* are often used for misfortunes that serve as a punishment and retribution, since God says: *for Allah is greatest in might* (baʾsan) *and severest in punishment* (4:84).

However, we can arguably infer the meaning of the two terms from the next verse, which mentions *ḍarrāʾ* (hardship) and *sarrāʾ* (ease), referring to things that make one unhappy, and things that make one happy, respectively. These are meant in an absolute sense, based on the context. Therefore, *ḍarrāʾ* means "any unfortunate event." In the current verse, it is mentioned after *baʾsāʾ* (misery) as a case of stating a general concept after a specific application of it.[1]

This verse describes a divine custom. The purpose of sending a prophet to a nation is to guide them to their path of growth. Whenever God has sent any prophet to any town, He afflicted them with some misfortune in their bodies and properties, hoping that their hardship would elicit them to entreat God and take recourse to Him. That would complement their prophet's call to belief and righteous deeds.

Hardships and misfortunes are a great help to the prophetic calls. As long as humans are endowed with a blessing, their enjoyment of that blessing distracts them from paying attention to the One Who has bestowed it upon them. They feel themselves needless because of that blessing. But once they lose that blessing, they feel the need. That is when misery and indigence descend on them, they grow impatient, and death threatens them. Thus their divine intuition (*fiṭrah*) awakens them to entreat and resort to the One Who can remove their need and deflect their disgrace. That is God. Some may not realize this [due to a lack of religious education], but it is hoped that they will be guided to the truth if they are informed about this [by the prophets]. God says: *When We bless man, he is disregardful and turns aside; but when an ill befalls him, he makes protracted supplications* (41:51).

ثُمَّ بَدَّلْنَا مَكَانَ السَّيِّئَةِ الْحَسَنَةَ حَتَّىٰ عَفَوْا وَقَالُوا قَدْ مَسَّ آبَاءَنَا الضَّرَّاءُ وَالسَّرَّاءُ فَأَخَذْنَاهُمْ بَغْتَةً وَهُمْ لَا يَشْعُرُونَ ﴿٩٥﴾

1 Therefore, *baʾsāʾ* is a specific form of misfortune, which is compatible with its interpretation as either the physical or the financial. (Trans.)

(7:95) ***Then We changed*** **(baddalnā, from tabdīl)** ***the evil for good until they multiplied [in numbers] and said, "Hardship and ease befell our fathers [too]." Then We seized them suddenly while they were unaware.***

Tabdīl (to replace, to substitute) is a ditransitive verb, where the second object replaces the first. In the context of this verse, evil (*sayyiʾah*) and good (*ḥasanah*) respectively refer to distress and comfort, or fear and hope—or hardship and ease, as it can be inferred from the subsequent part of the verse: *Hardship and ease befell our fathers [too]*.

… until they multiplied **(ʿafaw, from ʿafw)…:** The word *ʿafw* has been interpreted as abundance. The meaning would be: "They increased in persons and wealth after God had reduced them [in number and wealth] through afflictions and misfortunes." It is also likely, although other exegetes have not suggested it, that *ʿafw* here means "effacement of signs" (*imḥāʾ al-athar*). As we read in a poem:

رَبْعٌ عَفَاهُ الدَّهْرُ طُولاً فَانْمَحَى قَدْ كَادَ مِنْ طُولِ الْبِلَى أَنْ يَمْصَحَا

A house that the world has rubbed off (*ʿafāhu*) and effaced (*fa-inmaḥá*);
Due to long erosion to the ground it's debased;
Just about its level, they seem to have embraced.

The meaning would be: "They effaced the traces of the previous evil with the new good which they were given."

… and said, "Hardship and ease befell our fathers [too]"…: This statement implies that since we live in this world of nature which is in a constant change and flux, we shall certainly face hardship and ease. This is an inevitable consequence of the world in which we live, where favorable and unfavorable events come our way one after another. This, however, has nothing to do with divine tests and tribulations.

Based on our suggested meaning for *ʿafw* [as effacement], we can say that the conjunction "and" in this part of the verse is interpretative. That is, the statement quoted from them here interprets how they effaced and ignored the divine custom of trial and tribulation. They did so by saying that hardship and ease are common events that occur in the world, one after another. These alternating periods are occurring to us just as they occurred to our fathers. This notion is similar to the verse: *And if We let him have a taste of Our mercy after hardship has befallen him, he will surely say, "This is my due! I do not think the Hour will ever set in"* (41:50).

… until (ḥattá) they multiplied [in numbers] and said…: The preposition "until" (*ḥattá*) indicates the end and consequence of the previous phrase. The meaning is: Then We replaced their suffering with blessings and inundated them with good, *to the point that* they forgot their previous state of misery, and said: "The good times and bad times are only different episodes of nature." The sequence of ease after misery led them to this end. However, it was more befitting for them to become mindful and realize that they must be more grateful during the good times, after their entreaty during the hard times. They altered the end that their Lord had wanted and planned for them, and pursued another end instead of it. As a result, God sealed their hearts, so they could no longer hear the word of truth.

Apparently the words "hardship" and "ease" are ordered in this way in accordance with the order of "evil" and "good" at the beginning of the verse: *Then We changed the evil for good.*

… Then We seized them suddenly while they were unaware: This sentence involves an indirect reference to humankind's ignorance about how God conducts the affairs of the world. That is why they are caught off guard by surprise. They think that they know how everything occurs, and what are the causes at work in the universe. They imagine they can protect themselves against destructive forces through defensive mechanisms that they have devised with their knowledge. God says: *When their messengers brought them manifest proofs, they exulted in the knowledge they possessed* (40:83).

وَلَوْ أَنَّ أَهْلَ الْقُرَىٰ آمَنُوا وَاتَّقَوْا لَفَتَحْنَا عَلَيْهِمْ بَرَكَاتٍ مِنَ السَّمَاءِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَلَٰكِنْ كَذَّبُوا فَأَخَذْنَاهُمْ بِمَا كَانُوا يَكْسِبُونَ ﴿٩٦﴾

(7:96) ***If the people of the towns had been faithful and Godwary, We would have opened to them blessings (barakāt) from the heaven and the earth. But they denied; so We seized them because of what they used to earn.***

The word *barakāt* means "abundant good" in all its variety, such as security, comfort, health, wealth and children. These are things where one is sometimes tested with a loss of them.

… We would have opened to them blessings from the heaven and the earth…: Here we see a metaphorical semblance. *Blessings* are compared

to channels that can be *opened* or closed. If a people are faithful and Godwary, then God will open these channels, through which various means of enjoyment will flow and shower upon them. These include: (1) blessings from the heaven, such as rain, snow, heat and cold, each in its place and in a beneficial amount; (2) blessings from the earth, such as grains, fruits and security.

If the people of the towns had been faithful and Godwary…: This phrase indicates that the opening of blessings upon a people is a result of *all* of them being faithful and Godwary. In other words, all humans, as a species, must have *īmān* (belief, faith) and *taqwá* (Godwariness, self-restraint). It is not sufficient for only some of them to have these qualities, because that entails disbelief and sin for others, in which case decay and corruption will ensue. This should be clear.

… But they denied; so We seized* (akhadhnāhum, from akhdh) *them because of what they used to earn: The context shows that *akhdh* (taking, seizing) means taking one for retribution and punishment. The reality of God's seizing and punishment is giving one's own actions back to the person. We just explained how this custom of God works.[1]

أَفَأَمِنَ أَهْلُ الْقُرَىٰ أَنْ يَأْتِيَهُمْ بَأْسُنَا بَيَاتًا وَهُمْ نَائِمُونَ ﴿٩٧﴾

(7:97) ***So do the people of the towns feel secure from Our punishment overtaking them at night* (bayātan) *while they are asleep?***

Bayāt and *tabyīt* mean "attacking the enemy at night." That is a form of *makr* (plot, scheme, contrivance, ruse) because the night is a time of rest and peace for humankind. People are naturally cut off from the outside as they rest and sleep.

The letter *fā*ʾ (so, therefore, then) at the beginning of the verse shows that the verse is stated as a logical consequence and conclusion to the last verse. This connection between the last verse and this verse can be elaborated as follows: As We said, sensual pleasures and tangible phenomena often deceive the people of the towns and veil them from supernatural realities beyond them. Thus they are suddenly overtaken with the punishment while they are unaware. Given this, are they now immune from God's punishment seizing them at night while sleep has covered them with unawareness?

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1 See the author's "Introduction" to the current set of verses. (Trans.)

أَوَأَمِنَ أَهْلُ الْقُرَىٰ أَنْ يَأْتِيَهُمْ بَأْسُنَا ضُحًى وَهُمْ يَلْعَبُونَ ﴿٩٨﴾

(7:98) ***Do the people of the towns feel secure from Our punishment overtaking them at midday* (ḍuḥá) *while they are playing around?***

Ḍuḥá means "forenoon," when the sun is fully up and sunlight covers everything. What is meant by "playing" is any activity that they engage in for achieving worldly purposes and enjoying material pleasures. If these activities are not pursued in the way of seeking the truth and eternal happiness, they are only sport and play. Therefore, *while they are playing around* is an indirect way of referring to worldly occupations. Similarly, one could arguably say that *while they are asleep* (7:97) in the last verse is an indirect way of referring to heedlessness [in general]. Some exegetes have suggested that "playing" in this verse is a metaphorical expression: they are engaged with things that are not beneficial as though they are playing games. The rest of the meaning should be clear.

أَفَأَمِنُوا مَكْرَ اللَّهِ ۚ فَلَا يَأْمَنُ مَكْرَ اللَّهِ إِلَّا الْقَوْمُ الْخَاسِرُونَ ﴿٩٩﴾

(7:99) ***Do they feel secure from Allah's devising* (makr)*? No one feels secure from Allah's devising except the people who are losers.***

Makr means "directing some harm—or something that leads to harm—to someone while they are not aware." As a divine act, this will always be a form of retribution. For instance, as a consequence of one's disobedience, God may seize the person with punishment whence they are not aware, or may treat them in a way that leads them toward punishment without them realizing. However, it is impossible that God would exercise *makr* (plot, scheme, contrivance, ruse) against a servant without any previous disobedience or violation on their part. We have addressed this repeatedly before.[1]

There is a subtle point in how these three verses are addressed: *So do the people of the towns feel secure?* (7:97); *Do the people of the towns feel secure?* (7:98); *Do they feel secure from Allah's devising?* (7:99). All three verses are expressed as rhetorical questions that imply negation and rebuke. In the second verse [7:98], God could have used a pronoun instead of a noun, just as in the third verse: "Do *they* feel secure…?" But He has

1 See volume 1 (1st ed.), p. 165 of the English translation, under verses 2:26-27; and volume 14, pp. 113-114, under verse 6:108. (Trans.)

used a noun instead: *Do the people of the towns…* (7:98). This implies that the two punishments [of night and day] are independent of one another, and either of them may afflict a people. Then, the plural pronoun in the third verse ["they" at the beginning of verse 7:99] refers to both groups in the last two verses. This makes the third verse a summary and conclusion of both verses.

… No one feels secure from Allah's devising except the people who are losers: Based on the last two verses, feeling secure from God's devising (*makr*) is itself part of God's devising, for it results in divine punishment. Therefore, those who feel secure from God's devising are losers, because they are caught in a plot exactly through their feeling of immunity.[1]

أَوَلَمْ يَهْدِ لِلَّذِينَ يَرِثُونَ الْأَرْضَ مِنْ بَعْدِ أَهْلِهَا أَنْ لَوْ نَشَاءُ أَصَبْنَاهُمْ بِذُنُوبِهِمْ ۚ وَنَطْبَعُ عَلَىٰ قُلُوبِهِمْ فَهُمْ لَا يَسْمَعُونَ ﴿١٠٠﴾

(7:100) ***Has guidance not come for those who*** **(yahdi lil-ladhīna)** ***inherited the earth after its [former] inhabitants that if We will We would punish them for their sins, and set a seal on their hearts so they would not hear?***

Those who inherited the earth after its [former] inhabitants are the subsequent generations who inherit the earth from their fathers.[2] The subject of this sentence is the pronoun "it," which refers to the overall story of the previous people of the towns. The verb "guided" (*yahdi*) is ditransitive. Its first object is *those who inherited the earth*. Given the usage of the letter *lām* (for) before this object, "guidance" here means "clarification" (*tabyīn*). The meaning is: "Have the stories of the towns that We recited not clarified for these people, in a guiding way, that if…?" The second object of

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1 One of the author's unrelenting commitments in *al-Mīzān* is to explain why the Qur'an uses the letter *fā'* (so, therefore, then) whenever it uses it. There is a letter *fā'* at the beginning of this sentence, which means that it is a conclusion to what was mentioned before. In this paragraph the author explains how the sentence follows from the last two verses as their *consequence*. (Trans.)

2 From here until the next subheading ("The First Interpretation of the Verse"), the text involves substantial linguistic discussions which may be less meaningful to a reader not concerned with the Arabic details of the verse. (Trans.)

the verb is: *that if We will We would punish them…*

The effective meaning is: We described for you a group of people whom We seized because of their sins. We first tested them, and then sealed their hearts, so they could not open to the admonitions of their prophets. Now, has it not dawned upon their descendants that We can, if We will, punish them for their sins? Do they not realize that nothing can block Us from them, nor can they protect themselves from Our might with anything?

Some have suggested that what is meant by "guidance" here is its necessary implication and result [which is knowledge]. Then the meaning would be: "Has [Our] guidance not made them realize *that if We will We would punish them for their sins?*" Another similar usage of the same verb can be found in the verse: *Has guidance not come for them how many generations We have destroyed before them, amid [the ruins of] whose dwellings they walk?* (32:26).

… and set a seal on their hearts so they would not hear?: The conjunction "and" connects this sentence to the one before it: *We would punish them*. This conjunction is acceptable because a present tense meaning is understood from the use of past tense in this case.[1] The meaning is: "Has guidance not come for them that if We will, We would set a seal…" Some have suggested that this sentence of the verse is a parenthetical remark that serves as a follow-up. There are also other views and aspects of the verse that the exegetes have addressed, but they are not worth discussing.

تِلْكَ الْقُرَىٰ نَقُصُّ عَلَيْكَ مِنْ أَنْبَائِهَا ۚ وَلَقَدْ جَاءَتْهُمْ رُسُلُهُمْ بِالْبَيِّنَاتِ فَمَا كَانُوا
لِيُؤْمِنُوا بِمَا كَذَّبُوا مِنْ قَبْلُ ۚ كَذَٰلِكَ يَطْبَعُ اللَّهُ عَلَىٰ قُلُوبِ الْكَافِرِينَ ﴿١٠١﴾

(7:101) ***These are the towns some of whose accounts We recount to you. Certainly their messengers brought them manifest proofs, but they were not to believe in what they had disbelieved earlier. Thus does Allah put a seal on the hearts of the faithless.***

This verse offers a second summary to the stories of the previous

1 In the original Arabic text of the verse, *aṣabnāhum* (would punish) is in the past tense, while *naṭbaʿu* (set a seal) is in the present tense. The author's point about the past tense implying a present tense meaning can be matched with the use of the verb *would* in the English translation of the verse. (Trans.)

nations and prophets in the chapter. We read the first summary in verse 7:94 (*We did not send a prophet to any town…*), up to verse 7:95 or 7:96.

These two summaries differ in terms of perspective. The first summary looks at God's treatment of these people: He visited them with misery and hardship, then changed evil for good, and then seized them suddenly while they were unaware. The second summary looks at *their* treatment of the religious call: Even though their messengers brought them manifest proofs, they did not believe because they had denied the message before. They were not in a condition [intellectually, spiritually and psychologically] to accept what they had rejected before. This [inability to believe] was a result of God's seal on their heart.

… but they were not to believe in what* (bi-mā) *they had disbelieved earlier…: Apparently the preposition "in what" (*bi-mā*) is an object of the verb "to believe." This means that the particle *mā* should be classified as *mawṣūlah* (meaning "what"). This can be confirmed by the verse: *but they were not to believe in what they had disbelieved in* (bihi) *earlier* (10:74). Verse 10:74 explicitly says *bihi* (in it, to it), which clearly shows that the particle *mā* means "what," indicating the object of belief and disbelief. The effective meaning is: They rejected the first time they were offered the message; thus they also did not accept it when they were offered it a second time.

… they were not (mā kānū) to believe…: This expression confirms our interpretation above, because it indicates a lack of prior readiness [to accept and absorb the message]. When one says, "I were not to visit so-and-so" (*mā kuntu li-ātī*) or "I were not to respect so-and-so given what he did" (*mā kuntu li-akrima*) it means: "I am not in a position to do so. I was not prepared for this." Similarly, the Qur'an says: *Allah were not* (mā kāna) *to leave the faithful in your present state, until He has separated the bad ones from the good* (3:179). It means: "He had willed from before to separate you from one another." Another similar verse is: *Allah is not to ever* (lam yakun) *forgive them, nor shall He guide them to any way* (4:137).

This idea is confirmed by the next verse: *And We did not find in most of them [loyalty to] any covenant. Indeed We found most of them to be transgressors* (7:102). The verse is a continuation of what we read in the current verse: *but they were not to believe in what they had disbelieved earlier* (7:101). The conjunction "and" at the beginning of verse 7:102 shows this connection and continuity, as per the theme and context of the verses.

Hence, the verses are saying: God initially made a covenant with these people, but they transgressed and rejected it right at the beginning. Later, when God's messengers came to them, they rejected the messengers and did not believe in them. *They were not to believe in what they had disbelieved earlier*.

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The First Interpretation of the Verse

… Thus does Allah put a seal on the hearts of the faithless: This ending is related to the previous part of the verse: *Certainly their messengers brought them manifest proofs, but they were not to believe in what they had disbelieved earlier*. The connection is that their disbelief in their messengers—despite having brought manifest proofs—was an example of God sealing their hearts. The reality of this seal is that God established disbelief in their hearts and anchored denial in their souls, such that they had no room to accept the call of the messengers when they brought them manifest proofs, for their hearts were occupied by the opposite of belief.

Here we can see that in terms of purport, these two verses [7:101-102] can be matched with the first two verses in this set: *We did not send a prophet to any town without visiting its people…* (7:94-95). As we saw above, verses 7:94-95 describe a divine custom: First God sends signs and communications which prove the foundations of the religious message, such as the divine oneness. Then He visits the people with misery and hardship. Then He exchanges the evil for good. Finally, He seals their hearts as a punishment for their wrongdoing. In the same light, we can elaborate the current verse [7:101] as follows.

The verse is saying: *Certainly their messengers brought them manifest proofs*, but they did not believe in the signs that were sent to them. These signs had prompted them to plead to God [at times of hardship] and be grateful to Him [at times of ease]. Instead, they doubted and hesitated with respect to these signs. Not only that, but they interpreted these events as the habits of nature and the fluctuations of time which alternate people's conditions. Thus they denied God's signs, and that denial became rooted in their hearts. Subsequently, when God's prophets invited them to the true religion, they did not believe in the truth and reminder that they were propagating, because they had rejected the very same truth and signs before. *They were not to believe in what they had disbelieved earlier*. That was why God sealed their hearts, such that they would not hear [the

message of truth].

They did not believe the second time as a result of God's seal, and God's seal was a result of their first denial. The first message they denied was implicit in being afflicted with misery and hardship, and then having evil replaced with good. The same idea is found in the verse: *Certainly We destroyed [several] generations before you when they perpetrated wrongs: their messengers brought them manifest proofs, but they were not to believe. Thus do We requite the guilty lot* (10:13). Similarly, after narrating Noah's story, God says: *Then after him We sent [other] messengers to their people. They brought them manifest proofs, but they were not to believe in what they had disbelieved in before. Thus do We seal the hearts of the transgressors* (10:74).

… Certainly their messengers brought them manifest proofs…: What is meant by *manifest proofs* here is all *āyāt* (signs and communications) which the prophets brought to them as a reminder. That includes the signs of God in the world, His signs within themselves [the subjective world], and the miracles of the prophets.

The Second Interpretation of the Verse

… but they were not* (fa-mā kānū) *to believe in what they had disbelieved earlier…: The letter *fā*ʾ ("but") at the beginning of this sentence shows that it builds on the last statement.[1] Their "earlier denial" was rejecting the guidance of their intellects. We observe through our reason that we are directed by God, our lives are subject to His authority, and He is our Lord alone. Their "subsequent denial" was not accepting the same truth when they were reminded of by the prophets.

The verse is saying: God sent them signs so that they might awaken, plead to Him [to remove His tribulations], and thank Him [for His blessings]. This is what their intellects had required them to do, but they refused to abide by its reminder. For this reason, they were not a community which would believe in the same signs and reminders which were brought to them by God's prophets.

Given this interpretation, "covenant" in the next verse [7:102] means God's intuitive covenant with the people through their intellects and with

1 The letter *fā*ʾ in this case can be translated as "because." The meaning would be: "They did not believe later because they did not believe earlier." (Trans.)

the tongue of His signs, stipulating that they should be servants of Him alone. Similarly, "transgression" in the next verse means breaking this covenant and not living up to it.

The Third Interpretation of the Verse

In addition, this intuitive covenant of God with the people existed prior to its existence in our current realm. He made the exact same covenant with them when He created and fashioned them, through His creation and fashioning of their father Adam. God made Adam a representative of all humankind. He made the angels prostrate to him, and placed him in the Garden. Then, when He ordered Adam's fall to the earth, God made a covenant with him that he and his descendants shall only serve God, and shall not associate any partners with Him.

In that prior realm [of pre-eternity], God had a certain *taqdīr* (measurement, ordainment, predestination) whereby He guided a group of people, and did not guide others. When these people appeared in our current realm subsequently, the first group pursued the path of guidance in their life, while the second group deviated from their primordial covenant. As a result, God sealed their hearts and error became fixed upon them after their evil deeds in this world. We explained this previously, in our exposition of verse: *Even as He brought you forth in the beginning, so will you return. A part [of humankind] He has guided, while error is fixed upon a part* (7:29-30).[1]

The verse is saying: They were not a group who would accept the call of the prophets because they rejected and denied it when they were first charged with God's covenant [prior to this realm]. We did not find most of them committed in this life to the covenant which they made in the previous realm. Rather, We found most of them to be transgressors who fell outside the boundaries of Our [primordial] covenant.[2]

Our third interpretation of the verse does not contradict the first two.[3]

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1 See volume 15 (1st ed.), pp. 105ff of the English translation. (Trans.)

2 For more on this, see verses 7:172-174 below. (Trans.)

3 In short, according to the first interpretation, their earlier disbelief was not heeding God's trials and tribulations. According to the second interpretation, their earlier disbelief was not heeding the guidance of their intellects. According to the third interpretation, their earlier disbelief was

These meanings are not on the same level to negate one another. Rather, they describe different planes of existence, where one is in continuation of the other. There is no contradiction between saying that one can potentially achieve either felicity or wretchedness through one's choice and free will in this life, and saying that one's path and end—whether felicitous or wretched—is determined through divine destiny.[1]

Views of Other Exegetes

Here are some other views suggested by the exegetes:

(1) Their "earlier disbelief" refers to their disbelief from when the messengers came to them, until they started to insist on their animosity. Their subsequent disbelief—*they were not to believe*—refers to their disbelief at the time of their insistence and animosity. The meaning is: They were not a group who would believe when their hostility set in, because they had not believed from the beginning of the prophets' call up to that point.

Comment: This is an implausible view that is not supported by any evidence from the text of the verses.

(2) Their "earlier disbelief" refers to denying the fundamental beliefs which are the roots of religious laws, such as God's oneness, the hereafter, the praiseworthiness of justice, and the blameworthiness of injustice. These are things that the human intellect can independently arrive at. Their subsequent disbelief pertains to the elaborate system of religious law. The meaning is: They were not a group who would believe in the details of religious legal codes given that they had rejected them in a nutshell prior to the elaborate call of the prophets.

Comment: This is against the apparent meaning of the verse, because the word *takdhīb* (disbelief, denial) is not used for the basic principles that we discern intuitively through our intellects, such as the very existence of

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not committing themselves to God's Lordship in the world of pre-existence. Their subsequent disbelief, according to all interpretations, was rejecting the call of God's messengers. As the author explains below, their earlier disbelief must have occurred in this world. Hence, he accepts the third interpretation as pertaining to a secondary and inner layer of meaning. (Trans.)

1 As the author has repeatedly explained in his discussions on compulsion, delegation, and free will, it could be that the pre-determined end is to be achieved *through* the choice and free will of the individuals in this world. All are part of the same system. (Trans.)

God. Moreover, the connections and contextual evidence that we discussed above would refute this interpretation.

(3) This verse is equivalent to the verse: *But were they to be sent back they would revert to what they were forbidden* (6:28). The meaning is: If We were to destroy them and then bring them back to life, they would not believe in what they had disbelieved in before their destruction.

Comment: This is the least plausible interpretation offered for the verse.

(4) The pronoun "they" in *they had disbelieved* refers to their forefathers, while the pronoun "they" in *they were not to believe* refers to themselves. The meaning is: The subsequent generations were not a group who would believe in what their previous generations had disbelieved in.

Comment: There is no evidence for this distinction. What springs to the mind from the context and flow of the verse is that these pronouns here—*but they were not to believe in what they had disbelieved*—all refer to the same noun. One could also merge this view with the next one.

(5) The verse is based on treating the previous generations and their descendants as a single unit which received the call of God's messengers. Therefore, the disbelief of the forefathers is attributed to their progeny, and the disbelief of the progeny is attributed to their forefathers. This is how the Qur'an often talks about the People of the Book, especially the Jews. In many verses, the Qur'an rebukes children for the acts of their fathers, and ascribes the wrongdoing of the past generations to their descendants. The meaning is: This is the state of humankind in response to the messengers that have come to them from the day they were created up to this day. The later generations do not believe in what the earlier generations disbelieved in.

Comment: This view is correct in and of itself, but it is not congruous with the verses. The context here is a narrative of the previous nations, as we can see in the verse: *These are the towns some of whose accounts We recount to you* (7:101). The above interpretation assumes that all these nations and generations over the centuries are a single continuum that extends from the beginning to the end, such that the disbelief of the later ones could be traced to and ascribed to the disbelief of the earlier ones. However, if that were the intended meaning, the verse should have talked about the messengers as an ongoing and recurrent event for that single continuum. For instance, the verse should have said, "Their messengers

used to bring them manifest proofs" or "Their messengers *constantly* brought them manifest proofs." But the verse says instead: *Certainly their messengers brought them manifest proofs*, which apparently indicates a one-time occurrence at a single point in time [and thus pertaining to only one generation, not to an extended chain of generations throughout the history]. The reader should reflect on this.

The same can be said about verse 10:74 [with almost identical wording]. God says, after narrating Noah's story: *Then after him We sent [other] messengers to their people. They brought them manifest proofs, but they were not to believe in what they had disbelieved in before* (10:74). What is meant by *We sent [other] messengers to their people* is that We sent each messenger to one community. Nevertheless, there are other verses in the Qur'an with expressions that show a continuous series of messengers, such as: *Whenever a messenger brought them that which was not to their liking, they would deny a part of them, and a part they would slay* (5:70). It is very likely that those who denied and those who slew the messengers were not the same people. Yet, the verse ascribes these acts to all of them as a single whole. Another verse is: *That was because their messengers used to bring them manifest proofs, but they said, "Shall humans be our guides?!" So they disbelieved and turned away, and Allah was in no need [of their faith]* (64:6).

(6) Their "earlier" disbelief refers to growing accustomed to reject God's messengers, or to deny any truth that they encountered. The letter *bāʾ* here—*in what* (bi-mā) *they had disbelieved*—indicates causality (called *sababiyyah*), and the particle *mā* serves to turn the verb that follows it into a verbal noun (called *maṣdariyyah*).[1] The meaning is: They would never believe in their Lord *because* of their previous disbelief in the messengers—or in any truth.

Comment: This interpretation is defeated by another similar verse in the Qur'an: *but they were not to believe in what they had disbelieved in* (bihi) *earlier* (10:74). The word *bihi* (in it, to it) shows that the particle *mā* means "what" (called *mawṣūlah*, indicating the object of belief and disbelief). Moreover, the letter *bāʾ* is apparently used to indicate the object of the transitive verb "believe" (*li-yuʾminū*). Finally, this view can be reduced to the first view.

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1 The verse's translation would be: "They were not to believe because of their disbelief earlier." (Trans.)

(7) Their "earlier" disbelief refers to what they hid inside on the day of the divine covenant [in the world of pre-existence]. The meaning is: When they received the call of the prophets, they were not to believe in what they had previously disbelieved on the primordial day of divine covenant.

Comment: This idea is correct in and of itself, but it pertains to an inner and hidden layer of the meaning. Qur'anic commentary should rely on the apparent meaning of the text. The apparent meaning is not the world of pre-existence because the verse says: *Thus does Allah put a seal on the hearts of the faithless*. This sentence explicitly shows that their disbelief was a consequence of the seal on their hearts. God seals the hearts due to one's previous denial, which then leads to the person denying the future calls of truth. God never takes the initiative to seal the hearts in this life. Rather, His sealing of the hearts is always preceded by some wrongdoing on the part of the person. This is the best evidence that their disbelief—which resulted in the seal on their hearts—occurred in this life [and does not refer to their denial in the world of pre-existence]. Then, once their hearts were sealed, they would not believe in what they had disbelieved earlier.

There are other verses in the Qur'an which confirm that God's sealing and closing of the hearts is always subsequent to some misdeed by the people in this world. It is not merely a result of the people's denial of their primordial covenant with God. It is certainly not befitting of God to seal their hearts initially in this world. The Qur'an says: *Thereby He leads many astray, and thereby He guides many; and He leads no one astray thereby except the transgressors* (2:26).

وَمَا وَجَدْنَا لِأَكْثَرِهِمْ مِنْ عَهْدٍ ۖ وَإِنْ وَجَدْنَا أَكْثَرَهُمْ لَفَاسِقِينَ ﴿١٠٢﴾

(7:102) ***And We did not find in most of them [loyalty to] any covenant. Indeed We found most of them to be transgressors.***

Majmaʿ al-bayān says:

"Covenant" in this verse means "loyalty to covenant." When they say, "So-and-so has no covenant" (*lā ʿahda lahu*), what is meant is that the person has no respect for a covenant, and does not observe it.

There are two possible meanings for "covenant" here: (1) God's covenant with the people through His signs [that is, their pleasant and unpleasant tribulations]. (2) Their covenant with God as they realize their need through their intellects, where they intuitively take on themselves to serve

God and not associate any partners with Him. The verse's meaning should be clear based on our discussions on the last verse.

Examining Narrations

(1) Al-Ḥusayn b. al-Ḥakam says: I wrote a letter to the righteous servant [Imam al-Kāẓim], saying: "I am a skeptic, just as Abraham said: *My Lord! Show me how You revive the dead* (2:260). So I would like you to show me something like that." The Imam wrote back to him: "Indeed Abraham was a believer, but he wanted his belief to grow. You, however, are a skeptic, and there is no good in a skeptic." The Imam further wrote: "Doubt may exist as long as certainty is not realized. But once certainty comes, doubt is not permissible." He also wrote: "Indeed the Almighty God says: *And We did not find in most of them [loyalty to] any covenant. Indeed We found most of them to be transgressors* (7:102). This was revealed concerning the skeptics."[1]

Author's comment: This narration's application of the verse [to skeptics] should be clear based on our exposition above. The second half of the hadith is also narrated by al-ʿAyyāshī,[2] except that it says: "This was revealed concerning an extreme skeptic."[3]

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1 *Al-Kāfī*, via its chain of narration.

2 *Tafsīr al-ʿAyyāshī*, on the authority of al-Ḥusayn b. al-Ḥakam al-Wāsiṭī.

3 The first narration says *shākk*, and the second says *shakkāk*, where the latter is an exaggerated form of the former. The terms can also be translated as "agnostic" or "doubter." (Trans.)

Verses 103-126

ثُمَّ بَعَثْنا مِنْ بَعْدِهِمْ مُوسى بِآياتِنا إِلى فِرْعَوْنَ وَ مَلائِهِ فَظَلَمُوا بِها فَانْظُرْ كَيْفَ
كانَ عاقِبَةُ الْمُفْسِدِينَ ﴿١٠٣﴾ وَ قالَ مُوسى يا فِرْعَوْنُ إِنِّي رَسُولٌ مِنْ رَبِّ الْعالَمِينَ ﴿١٠٤﴾
حَقِيقٌ عَلى أَنْ لا أَقُولَ عَلَى اللَّهِ إِلاَّ الْحَقَّ قَدْ جِئْتُكُمْ بِبَيِّنَةٍ مِنْ رَبِّكُمْ فَأَرْسِلْ
مَعِيَ بَنِي إِسْرائِيلَ ﴿١٠٥﴾ قالَ إِنْ كُنْتَ جِئْتَ بِآيَةٍ فَأْتِ بِها إِنْ كُنْتَ مِنَ الصَّادِقِينَ
﴿١٠٦﴾ فَأَلْقى عَصاهُ فَإِذا هِيَ ثُعْبانٌ مُبِينٌ ﴿١٠٧﴾ وَ نَزَعَ يَدَهُ فَإِذا هِيَ بَيْضاءُ لِلنَّاظِرِينَ
﴿١٠٨﴾ قالَ الْمَلَأُ مِنْ قَوْمِ فِرْعَوْنَ إِنَّ هذا لَساحِرٌ عَلِيمٌ ﴿١٠٩﴾ يُرِيدُ أَنْ يُخْرِجَكُمْ مِنْ
أَرْضِكُمْ فَما ذا تَأْمُرُونَ ﴿١١٠﴾ قالُوا أَرْجِهْ وَ أَخاهُ وَ أَرْسِلْ فِي الْمَدائِنِ حاشِرِينَ ﴿١١١﴾
يَأْتُوكَ بِكُلِّ ساحِرٍ عَلِيمٍ ﴿١١٢﴾ وَ جاءَ السَّحَرَةُ فِرْعَوْنَ قالُوا إِنَّ لَنا لَأَجْراً إِنْ كُنَّا
نَحْنُ الْغالِبِينَ ﴿١١٣﴾ قالَ نَعَمْ وَ إِنَّكُمْ لَمِنَ الْمُقَرَّبِينَ ﴿١١٤﴾ قالُوا يا مُوسى إِمَّا أَنْ تُلْقِيَ
وَ إِمَّا أَنْ نَكُونَ نَحْنُ الْمُلْقِينَ ﴿١١٥﴾ قالَ أَلْقُوا فَلَمَّا أَلْقَوْا سَحَرُوا أَعْيُنَ النَّاسِ وَ
اسْتَرْهَبُوهُمْ وَ جاؤُ بِسِحْرٍ عَظِيمٍ ﴿١١٦﴾ وَ أَوْحَيْنا إِلى مُوسى أَنْ أَلْقِ عَصاكَ فَإِذا هِيَ
تَلْقَفُ ما يَأْفِكُونَ ﴿١١٧﴾ فَوَقَعَ الْحَقُّ وَ بَطَلَ ما كانُوا يَعْمَلُونَ ﴿١١٨﴾ فَغُلِبُوا هُنالِكَ وَ
انْقَلَبُوا صاغِرِينَ ﴿١١٩﴾ وَ أُلْقِيَ السَّحَرَةُ ساجِدِينَ ﴿١٢٠﴾ قالُوا آمَنَّا بِرَبِّ الْعالَمِينَ ﴿١٢١﴾
رَبِّ مُوسى وَ هارُونَ ﴿١٢٢﴾ قالَ فِرْعَوْنُ آمَنْتُمْ بِهِ قَبْلَ أَنْ آذَنَ لَكُمْ إِنَّ هذا لَمَكْرٌ
مَكَرْتُمُوهُ فِي الْمَدِينَةِ لِتُخْرِجُوا مِنْها أَهْلَها فَسَوْفَ تَعْلَمُونَ ﴿١٢٣﴾ لَأُقَطِّعَنَّ
أَيْدِيَكُمْ وَ أَرْجُلَكُمْ مِنْ خِلافٍ ثُمَّ لَأُصَلِّبَنَّكُمْ أَجْمَعِينَ ﴿١٢٤﴾ قالُوا إِنَّا إِلى رَبِّنا
مُنْقَلِبُونَ ﴿١٢٥﴾ وَ ما تَنْقِمُ مِنَّا إِلاَّ أَنْ آمَنَّا بِآياتِ رَبِّنا لَمَّا جاءَتْنا رَبَّنا أَفْرِغْ عَلَيْنا

صَبْراً وَ تَوَفَّنا مُسْلِمِينَ ﴿١٢٦﴾

(7:103) *Then after them We sent Moses with Our signs to Pharaoh and his elite, but they wronged them. So observe the fate of the agents of corruption!*

(7:104) *And Moses said, "O Pharaoh, I am indeed a messenger from the Lord of all worlds.*

(7:105) *It behooves me to not ascribe anything to Allah except the truth. I certainly bring you a manifest proof from your Lord. So let the Children of Israel go with me."*

(7:106) *He said, "If you have brought a sign, produce it, if you are truthful."*

(7:107) *Thereat he threw down his staff, and behold, it became a manifest python.*

(7:108) *Then he drew out his hand, and behold, it was white to the onlookers.*

(7:109) *The elite of Pharaoh's people said, "This is indeed an expert magician;*

(7:110) *he seeks to expel you from your land." "So what do you advise?"*

(7:111) *They said, "Put him and his brother off for a while, and send heralds to the cities,*

(7:112) *to bring you every expert magician."*

(7:113) *And the magicians came to Pharaoh. They said, "We shall indeed have a reward if we were to be the victors?"*

(7:114) *He said, "Of course! And indeed you shall be among those near [to me]."*

(7:115) *They said, "O Moses, will you throw [first], or shall we throw?"*

(7:116) *He said, "Throw [yours]." So when they threw, they bewitched the people's eyes and overawed them, producing a tremendous magic.*

(7:117) *And We signaled to Moses that: "Throw down your staff." And behold, it was swallowing what they had faked.*

(7:118) *So the truth set in, and what they had wrought was reduced to naught.*

(7:119) *Thereat they were vanquished, and they retreated, humiliated.*

(7:120) *And the magicians were cast down in prostration.*

(7:121) *They said, "We have believed in the Lord of all worlds,*

(7:122) *the Lord of Moses and Aaron."*

(7:123) *Pharaoh said, "Do you profess faith in Him before I permit you? It is indeed a plot you have devised in the city to expel its people from it. Soon you will know [the consequences]!*
(7:124) *Surely I will cut off your hands and feet on opposite sides, and then I will surely crucify all of you."*
(7:125) *They said, "Indeed we shall return to our Lord.*
(7:126) *You are vindictive toward us only because we have believed in the signs of our Lord, when they came to us." "Our Lord! Pour patience upon us, and let us die as submitters."*

Introduction

Here the chapter starts a series of stories about Prophet Moses. The current set of verses describe when he first went to Pharaoh and announced his mission to deliver the Children of Israel. He showed Pharaoh the two miracles that God had given him on the first night when He talked to him on Mount Ṭūr. The next set of verses briefly discuss his stay in Egypt among the Children of Israel, as part of his mission to save them, as well as the calamities which befell Pharaoh's people, up to when God delivers the Israelites. The chapter then talks about the revelation of the Torah, and the worship of the calf by the Children of Israel. Then we shall read some miscellaneous stories about the Israelites, all meant as a lesson for the vigilant reader.

Commentary

ثُمَّ بَعَثْنَا مِنْ بَعْدِهِمْ مُوسَىٰ بِآيَاتِنَا إِلَىٰ فِرْعَوْنَ وَمَلَإِيهِ فَظَلَمُوا بِهَا ۖ فَانْظُرْ كَيْفَ كَانَ عَاقِبَةُ الْمُفْسِدِينَ ﴿١٠٣﴾

(7:103) ***Then after them We sent Moses with Our signs to Pharaoh and his elite, but they wronged them. So observe the fate of the agents of corruption!***

Moses is introduced differently than the previous prophets in this chapter. This shows special attention and emphasis, since he was among the Resolute Messengers (*ūlū al-ʿazm*), meaning that he had a scripture with a divine code of law (shariah). The evolution of divine religions entered a new stage of elaboration with Moses' mission, following the missions of Noah and Abraham. We can infer these stages of transformation

from the wording of the verses in this chapter. God introduces Prophet Noah by saying: *Certainly* (la-qad) *We sent Noah to his people* (7:59). Then He introduces Prophets Hūd and Ṣāliḥ by saying: *And to [the people of] ʿĀd, Hūd* (7:65); *And to [the people of] Thamūd, Ṣāliḥ* (7:73). These two prophets are introduced in a similar manner because they propagated Noah's religion. Then we see a change when Prophet Lot is introduced, because he belonged to Abraham's religion, which marked a new stage of religion: *And Lot, when he said to his people* (7:80). Then Prophet Shuʿayb is introduced in the same manner [as Prophets Hūd and Ṣāliḥ: *And to [the people of] Midian, Shuʿayb* (7:85)]. And here we see another change when Prophet Moses is introduced: *Then after them We sent Moses with Our signs to Pharaoh and his elite* (7:103).

Moses was the third Resolute Messenger, who brought a new scripture and legal code. In reality, there is only one divine religion, and there is no contradiction or opposition between the different divine codes of law. Their only difference is in terms of concision, elaboration, addition and perfection. And these differences are based on humankind's gradual growth of the capacity to receive divine teachings over the ages. The potentialities of humankind constantly evolve from limitation to perfection, until they reach their highest stage of intellectual development. At that point, God's scripture and laws become established forever, and divine messengership and prophethood are sealed. Then there shall no longer be a new scripture or legal code. Humanity will still have to grow gradually toward perfection, but their growth will be through practicing and spreading this religion within their societies, and coming under its umbrella completely. Our development is through realizing the truth of divine teachings, and advancing in knowledge and practice as promoted by the Book of God and His legal code. *The earth indeed belongs to Allah, and He gives its inheritance to whomever He wills of His servants, and the outcome will be in favor of the Godwary* (7:128).

Then after them We sent Moses with Our signs…: This verse involves a concise reference to Moses' story overall. Then the next verse starts a detailed account of it: *And Moses said, "O Pharaoh…"* (7:104). While we classified the stories in this chapter as the story of Moses, the story of Noah, the story of Hūd, and so on, they are in fact the stories of the people and nations to whom these noble prophets were sent. The central theme of these stories is to describe how the people met God's messengers with

rejection and denial, and how they ended being destroyed with a divine punishment that exterminated them entirely. That is why one can see that all these stories end with a massive punishment that took the lives of the people.

The reader should also remember what we said at the beginning of this chapter: the message of the chapter is to discuss how the people have kept up with the divine covenant which God has made with them all. This is a warning for all people in general, and a reminder for the believers in particular. These two points—warning and reminder—are the common theme and purpose between chapters with start with *alif-lām-mīm* [Chapters 2, 3, 29, 30, 31, 32] and Sūrah Ṣād [Chapter 38].[1]

Then after them…: That is, after the above mentioned prophets: Noah, Hūd, Ṣāliḥ, Lot and Shuʿayb.

… We sent Moses with Our signs to Pharaoh and his elite …: He was sent to the king of Egypt and his prominent courtiers. *Firʿawn* (Pharaoh) was a general title for the rulers of Egypt, much like *qayṣar* (Caesar), *kasrá* (Chosroes, Khosrau) and *faghfūr* (Huangdi) in Rome, Persia and China, respectively. The Qur'an has not mentioned the specific name of this Pharaoh to whom Moses was sent, and whom God drowned through Moses' hand.

… with Our signs…: This apparently refers to the miracles of Moses, including what he brought at the beginning of his call—turning his staff into a python, and drawing his hand from his armpit white—as well as the afflictions that God sent upon them later: *flood and locusts, lice, frogs and blood, as distinct signs* (7:133). The miracles of no other prophet in the Qur'an amounts to those of Moses in abundance.

… but they wronged them…: They wronged the signs of God, as we shall see in the verses below. Wronging anything would be in accordance to that thing. Wronging the signs of God means rejecting and denying them.

… So observe the fate of the agents of corruption: The verse turns our attention to the end result of their corruption so that we may learn a lesson. They used to make mischief in the earth and oppress the Children of Israel. Part of Moses' message, when he met Pharaoh, was: *So let the Children of Israel go with me* (7:105). Elsewhere the Qur'an narrates from

1 See the author's "Introduction" to the chapter, at the very beginning of volume 15 of the English translation. (Trans.)

him: *Let the Children of Israel go with us, and do not torture them* (20:47).

وَقَالَ مُوسَىٰ يَا فِرْعَوْنُ إِنِّي رَسُولٌ مِنْ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ ﴿١٠٤﴾

(7:104) ***And Moses said, "O Pharaoh, I am indeed a messenger from the Lord of all worlds."***

Here the chapter starts an elaborate account of Moses' mission, as we said above. Moses introduced himself as a "messenger" in order to prepare the grounds for describing the purpose of his mission. In confronting the polytheists, it is most appropriate to refer to God as *the Lord of all worlds*. This counters their view that there is an independent lord for every aspect or part of the universe, and each community has its own god.

حَقِيقٌ عَلَىٰ أَنْ لَا أَقُولَ عَلَى اللَّهِ إِلَّا الْحَقَّ ۚ قَدْ جِئْتُكُمْ بِبَيِّنَةٍ مِنْ رَبِّكُمْ فَأَرْسِلْ مَعِيَ بَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ ﴿١٠٥﴾

(7:105) ***"It behooves me to not ascribe anything to Allah except the truth. I certainly bring you a manifest proof from your Lord. So let the Children of Israel go with me."***

Here Moses emphasizes his truthfulness in his mission. He says, "It is most befitting of me to speak the truth, and not to ascribe to God anything that He has not charged me with, in my mission from Him to you."

… I certainly bring you a manifest proof from your Lord…: This sentence serves to justify all the previous claims of Moses. One could also say that the sentence justifies his first and foremost claim: *I am indeed a messenger from the Lord of all worlds* (7:104). That was his main message, from which his other statements are derived.

***It behooves me to* (ḥaqīq ʿalá)…:** *Ḥaqīq* is synonymous with *ḥarī* (behooving, befitting, worthy, appropriate). Linguistically speaking, the word *ḥaqīq* is used with the letter *bāʾ* before its object. For instance, to say that someone is respectable, one would say, "So-and-so is *ḥaqīq bil-ikrām*." In this verse, however, it is used with the preposition *ʿalá* (on, upon, over). Perhaps this usage is meant to convey the meaning of being very eager and anxious about something. That is: "I am very concerned about…"[1]

1 In the context of this verse, *ʿalá* can be translated as "about." This is a positive sense of *ḥirṣ* (greed, concern, preoccupation), as also attributed to the Prophet Muḥammad in verse 9:128. (Trans.)

The verse has also been recited as *ḥaqīq ʿalayya*, with a stress on the letter *yāʾ*. This is based on the usage of the verb *ḥaqqa* as *wajaba* (it is incumbent, it is obligatory). The meaning would be: "It is incumbent on me (*ʿalayya*) to not ascribe anything to Allah except the truth." This makes the word *ḥaqīq* (behooving, befitting) the predicate of the sentence. The subject would be: *to not ascribe anything*…[1] The rest of the meaning should be clear.

قَالَ إِنْ كُنْتَ جِئْتَ بِآيَةٍ فَأْتِ بِهَا إِنْ كُنْتَ مِنَ الصَّادِقِينَ ﴿١٠٦﴾

(7:106) ***He said, "If you have brought a sign, produce it, if you are truthful."***

There are two conditions in this verse. The first condition—*If you have brought a sign*—challenges Moses to demonstrate his truthfulness about having brought a sign. Then the second condition at the end of the verse shows that Pharaoh did not belief in Moses' truthfulness with respect to his claim that he has brought a sign. The effective meaning is: "If you have brought a sign, then produce it, but I do not think that you are truthful in what you say." Hence, the two conditions in the verse are not repetitive.[2]

فَأَلْقَىٰ عَصَاهُ فَإِذَا هِيَ ثُعْبَانٌ مُبِينٌ ﴿١٠٧﴾

(7:107) ***Thereat he threw down* (fa-alqá) *his staff, and behold, it became a manifest python* (thuʿbān).**

As the exegetes have pointed out, the letter *fāʾ* at the beginning of this verse is called *jawābiyyah* (responding, responsive). It means: "Moses responded to him by throwing down his staff." This type of *fāʾ* is a subdivision of the general *fāʾ* which indicates *tafrīʿ* (consequence, conclusion). The aspect of "response" is understood from its particular application in a given context.

Thuʿbān means "a huge snake." Elsewhere God says: *when he saw it wriggling as if it were a snake* (jānn), *he turned his back [to flee]* (28:31).

1 The meaning would be: "Not ascribing anything to God except the truth is obligatory on me." (Trans.)

2 In other words, the two conditions serve two different purposes. The first condition challenges him to show his miracle. The second condition expresses Pharaoh's suspicion and incredulity. (Trans.)

The word *jānn* means "a small snake." As some exegetes have explained, there is no contradiction between these verses, because they pertain to different stories. The small snake appeared upon Moses' first conversation with God at the night in Mount Ṭūr. The Qur'an also calls it "snake" (*ḥayyah*) in general when recounting the same story elsewhere: *So he threw it down, and behold, it was a snake, moving swiftly* (20:20). The large snake, however, occurred when he went to Pharaoh, and Pharaoh demanded him to produce miracles.[1]

وَنَزَعَ يَدَهُ فَإِذَا هِيَ بَيْضَاءُ لِلنَّاظِرِينَ ﴿١٠٨﴾

(7:108) ***Then he drew out his hand, and behold, it was white to the onlookers.***

That is, he drew out his hand from his armpit, as mentioned in these verses: *Now clasp your hand to your armpit: it will emerge white, without any fault* (20:22); *Insert your hand into your armpit. It will emerge white, without any fault* (28:32).

According to some narrations, his hand would shine like the sun whenever he produced this miracle. But the Qur'an only describes it as being white to the viewers. Nevertheless, it was such whiteness that the viewers would recognize it as a supernatural phenomenon.

قَالَ الْمَلَأُ مِنْ قَوْمِ فِرْعَوْنَ إِنَّ هَٰذَا لَسَاحِرٌ عَلِيمٌ ﴿١٠٩﴾

(7:109) ***The elite of Pharaoh's people said, "This is indeed an expert magician."***

God does not narrate what Pharaoh said at this point, but He narrates the conversation that broke out amongst his chiefs and attendants. It is as though they had a council where they would discuss what was up for decision-making. One would offer his view to others to approve, and then they would present Pharaoh with whatever they agreed upon, so that he could execute it.

In this setting, they discussed the case of Moses and the miracles that they observed from him with one another. They said: "This is indeed a knowledgeable magician, but he is lying about his mission from God.

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1 There are two alternative ways to reconcile these verses: (1) It first appeared as a small snake, and then grew into a large one. (2) It was like a small snake in terms of swiftness, and like a large one in terms of size. (Trans.)

He is using sorcery to demand the Israelites to be freed from bondage. This way, they will join and support him, and he will lead them outside of your land and abolish your excellent tradition [20:63]. So what do you suggest in order to cancel his scheme and extinguish this fire which he has kindled? Should he be killed? Should he be crucified? Should he be imprisoned? Or should he be challenged with another magician like himself?" They agreed on the last view, and offered it to Pharaoh: *Put him and his brother off for a while, and send heralds to the cities, to bring you every expert magician* (7:111-112).

So what do you advise? (7:110) is something that elite of Egypt said among each other, and *Put him…* (7:111-112) is what they suggested to Pharaoh as their collective decision. What is narrated from the elite in these verses [7:109-110] is narrated from Pharaoh elsewhere in the Qur'an: *He said to the elite [who stood] around him, "This is indeed an expert magician who seeks to expel you from your land with his magic. So what do you advise?" They said, "Put him and his brother off for a while, and send heralds to the cities to bring you every expert magician"* (26:34-37). Putting these verses together, we can deduce that first Pharaoh brought up the issue, then his courtiers consulted with each other about it. They agreed with Pharaoh's opinion, and suggested that it is best to defeat Moses' magic with magic. Moreover, the Qur'an narrates that Pharaoh made the same statement [as in verse 7:110] and his elite's decision [as in verses 7:111-112] to Moses: *He said, "Have you come to us, Moses, to expel us from our land with your magic? Yet we [too] will bring you a magic like it"* (20:57-58). The current verses are perhaps a summary of the story, saying that the council suggested this to Pharaoh, and he then announced it himself to Moses.

Pharaoh's elite also had another consultation session once the magicians rallied around Pharaoh. There they discussed the matter with one another privately, as God says: *So they disputed their matter among themselves, and kept their confidential talks secret. They said, "These two are indeed magicians who intend to expel you from your land with their magic, and to abolish your excellent tradition"* (20:62-63).

In short: First Pharaoh raised the issue for his elites to discuss and counsel about. He asked for their opinion on what to do. They consulted with one another, confirmed Pharaoh's view, and advised him to keep Moses and Aaron in custody, and to gather around the magicians to challenge him. Pharaoh accepted this advice, and announced it to Moses. Then

the elite gathered once again for a private consultation upon the arrival of the magicians. They agreed that the magicians must unanimously oppose Moses with all the magic that they could produce, as a single army.

يُرِيدُ أَنْ يُخْرِجَكُمْ مِنْ أَرْضِكُمْ ۖ فَمَاذَا تَأْمُرُونَ ﴿١١٠﴾

(7:110) "***He seeks to expel you from your land.*" *"So what do you advise?"***

He wants to find assistance from the Children of Israel in order to take hold of Egypt, destroy your independence, and drive you out of your land. It was common in the ancient times for one nation to attack another, defeat them, occupy their land and homes, and then expel them from there into exile.

قَالُوا أَرْجِهْ وَأَخَاهُ وَأَرْسِلْ فِي الْمَدَائِنِ حَاشِرِينَ ﴿١١١﴾ يَأْتُوكَ بِكُلِّ سَاحِرٍ عَلِيمٍ ﴿١١٢﴾

(7:111-112) ***They said, "Put him and his brother off*** **(arjih)** ***for a while, and send heralds to the cities, to bring you every expert magician."***

His brother refers to Aaron. The word *arjih* is an imperative derived from *irjāʾ*, which means "to postpone, to put off." The meaning is: Put him and his brother off; do not hasten to something evil like killing them at this point, lest you may be accused of injustice, cruelty and the like. Instead, dispatch some emissaries from your army to the towns to mobilize the magicians and bring them to you. Then counter the sorcery of Moses with the sorcery of the magicians.

The letter *hāʾ* at the end of *arjih* should be pronounced with *sukūn* (no vowel). It introduces a pause (*sakt*) at the end of the word.[1] The word has also been recited as *arjihi* (with a *kasrah* on the letter *hāʾ*). This is based on the original term being *arjiʾhu*, where the letter *hāʾ* is a masculine pronoun, referring to Moses. The letter *hamzah* was then changed to a *yāʾ*, and then it was omitted.[2]

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1 This letter *hāʾ* is called *hāʾ al-sakt*, which is neither part of the word's root, nor a pronoun. It is added to manifest the vowel of the letter before it. It is originally meant for the reciter to pause upon it, albeit briefly. (Trans.)

2 The *kasrah* vowel on the letter *hāʾ* would indicate this omission. It should be noted that the common recitation—*arjih*—would also involve an omission of a pronoun referring to Moses, in order to be consistent with the addition of *his brother*. Therefore, the two versions are apparently two ways of reciting

وَجَاءَ السَّحَرَةُ فِرْعَوْنَ قَالُوا إِنَّ لَنَا لَأَجْرًا إِنْ كُنَّا نَحْنُ الْغَالِبِينَ ﴿١١٣﴾

(7:113) ***And the magicians came to Pharaoh. They said, "We shall indeed have a reward if we were to be the victors?"***

Part of the story is omitted here for concision. What is meant is that Pharaoh dispatched heralds, summoned the magicians, and then *the magicians came*.

… We shall indeed have a reward…: They asked for a reward in the form of a declarative statement, in order to emphasize their request. It is rather common to express a prescriptive or non-assertive statement (*inshāʾ*) in the form of a declarative or assertive statement (*ikhbār*). It could also be that the sentence is in fact a question, where the inquisitive particle (*adāt al-suʾāl*) is omitted. This is how Ibn ʿĀmir has recited the verse:[1] *They said, "Shall we* (a-inna lanā) *indeed have a reward…?"*

قَالَ نَعَمْ وَإِنَّكُمْ لَمِنَ الْمُقَرَّبِينَ ﴿١١٤﴾

(7:114) ***He said, "Of course! And indeed you shall be among those near [to me]."***

Pharaoh responded positively to their request, and added to their incentive by promising them nearness to himself.

قَالُوا يَا مُوسَىٰ إِمَّا أَنْ تُلْقِيَ وَإِمَّا أَنْ نَكُونَ نَحْنُ الْمُلْقِينَ ﴿١١٥﴾

(7:115) ***They said, "O Moses, will you throw [first], or shall we throw?"***

They said this in a state of having prepared themselves for competition. They gave Moses the choice and let him decide who should go first. The meaning is: If you want, you can go first and throw your staff; and if you want, we will throw our ropes and staffs first.

This statement implies a sense of self-confidence and defiance. It shows that they did not care whether Moses were to perform before them

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the same word. (Trans.)

1 There is an additional *hamzah* at the beginning of their statement in this case, which indicates a yes-no question. There are other recitations, besides Ibn ʿĀmir's, with this addition, and it is also the common recitation of verse 26:41. Either way, the verse implies a question, and the meaning would be the same. (Trans.)

or after them. Either way they would have no fear of him; they were assured of their victory. Nevertheless, giving an option to the other side is also an expression of courtesy in and of itself.[1]

قَالَ أَلْقُوا ۖ فَلَمَّا أَلْقَوْا سَحَرُوا أَعْيُنَ النَّاسِ وَاسْتَرْهَبُوهُمْ وَجَاءُوا بِسِحْرٍ عَظِيمٍ ﴿١١٦﴾

(7:116) ***He said, "Throw [yours]." So when they threw, they bewitched*** **(saḥarū)** ***the people's eyes and overawed them*** **(istarʿabūhum, from istirʿāb),** ***producing a tremendous magic*** **(bi-siḥr ʿaẓīm).**

God has described their magic as great and tremendous. In this context, *siḥr* (magic, sorcery, witchcraft, bewitchment) is a way of influencing the senses of the other side, such that they would observe something without any external reality. We discussed this under the verse: *And they followed what the devils pursued during Solomon's reign…* (2:102).[2] *Istirʿāb* is "to frighten someone." The rest of the meaning should be clear.

وَأَوْحَيْنَا إِلَىٰ مُوسَىٰ أَنْ أَلْقِ عَصَاكَ ۖ فَإِذَا هِيَ تَلْقَفُ مَا يَأْفِكُونَ ﴿١١٧﴾

(7:117) ***And We signaled to Moses that*** **(an)*****: "Throw down your staff." And behold, it was swallowing*** **(talqafu, from laqf)** ***what they had faked*** **(yaʾfikūna, from ifk).**

The Arabic particle *an* (that) is descriptive.[3] *Laqf* and *laqafān* mean "swallowing something quickly." *Ifk* means "twisting something away from its original form." That is why it sometimes means a lie. The verse clearly involves some omissions for the purpose of concision. The implied meaning is: After they threw their things, We signaled [or revealed] to Moses to "Throw down your staff." He threw it, whereby it suddenly turned into a snake, and immediately swallowed up what they had faked.

فَوَقَعَ الْحَقُّ وَبَطَلَ مَا كَانُوا يَعْمَلُونَ ﴿١١٨﴾

(7:118) ***So the truth set in*** **(fa-waqaʿa),** ***and what they had wrought was reduced to naught.***

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1 In certain professions and sports, it is common for its practitioners to observe certain forms of courtesy even toward their opponents. (Trans.)

2 See volume 2 (1st ed.), pp. 28ff of the English translation. (Trans.)

3 The particle's function is to show that the following statement clarifies what was signaled to Moses. (Trans.)

What they had wrought refers to their sorcery and bewitchment. The verb *waqaʿa* means "to land, to drop, to be established, to befall." This could be a metaphorical expression. It is as though the truth is something suspended in the air, and it is uncertain what will happen to it: Will it be established on the earth by landing on it and staying there, or not? The verse confirms that indeed it the truth landed and was established.

فَغُلِبُوا هُنَالِكَ وَانْقَلَبُوا صَاغِرِينَ ﴿١١٩﴾

(7:119) ***Thereat* (hunālika) *they were vanquished, and they retreated, humiliated.***

Pharaoh and his team were defeated. *Hunālika* is a demonstrative pronoun that is used for objects at a distance. Here it refers to the great congregation where people had gathered and were watching from all sides.

… and they retreated, humiliated: The came back abased; they were embarrassed.

وَأُلْقِيَ السَّحَرَةُ سَاجِدِينَ ﴿١٢٠﴾ قَالُوا آمَنَّا بِرَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ ﴿١٢١﴾ رَبِّ مُوسَىٰ وَهَارُونَ ﴿١٢٢﴾

(7:120-122) ***And the magicians were cast down in prostration. They said, "We have believed in the Lord of all worlds, the Lord of Moses and Aaron."***

The first verse is expressed in the passive voice: *were cast down*. It was obviously the magicians who threw themselves down in prostration, but the subject is not mentioned in the sentence. This way of expression is to show the extent to which they were influenced by Moses' miracle. They were completely awestruck and helpless as they observed this magnificent sign, such that they lost sense of themselves, and fell down immediately in prostration. It was such a spontaneous reaction that they did not realize who cast them down.

The miracle of Moses left them no choice but to prostrate themselves on the earth, and to believe in the Lord of all worlds, in whom Moses and Aaron believed. Naming Moses and Aaron here indicates that they not only believed in God as the Lord of all worlds, but also in Moses and Aaron [as God's messengers].

According to some exegetes, the magicians added *the Lord of Moses and Aaron* (7:122) as an interpretation for *the Lord of all worlds* (7:121) in order to clarify that they do not mean Pharaoh, who used to claim that he

was the Lord of all worlds. However, this interpretation is not quite accurate, because the concept of "Lord of all worlds" was not defined in its real sense for the polytheists and pagans. They did not recognize anyone as a central authority who owns all worlds, who supports their existence, and who directs the affairs of all their constituents. Instead, they believed that the world of existence, with all its different parts and aspects, is divided between a myriad of lords. Among them, they believed God to be only at the top of the chain, as the Lord of the other lords and the God of the other gods. They did not believe God to be the Lord of everyone, including the lower lords *and* their subjects.

Pharaoh's claim, as narrated by God, was: *I am your supreme lord* (79:24). The exclusive superiority intended here is with respect to fulfilling the needs of the people, meaning the Egyptians in particular, based on his proximity and connection to them. It does not mean that he directed the affairs of all worlds as their lord. Nonetheless, polytheism has been surrounded by so much superstition that it would not be a surprise if they believed Pharaoh to be the lord of all worlds, even though it would certainly contravene the principles of their religion.

قَالَ فِرْعَوْنُ آمَنْتُمْ بِهِ قَبْلَ أَنْ آذَنَ لَكُمْ ۖ إِنَّ هَٰذَا لَمَكْرٌ مَكَرْتُمُوهُ فِي الْمَدِينَةِ لِتُخْرِجُوا مِنْهَا أَهْلَهَا ۖ فَسَوْفَ تَعْلَمُونَ ﴿١٢٣﴾

(7:123) ***Pharaoh said, "Do you profess faith in Him before I permit you? It is indeed a plot you have devised in the city to expel its people from it. Soon you will know [the consequences]!"***

Pharaoh said this to the magicians out of hubris and contempt. It is a declarative sentence which implies rebuke and censure based on the context. It could also be a rhetorical question which implies a negation or rebuke, with the inquisitive particle omitted from the verse.[1]

… It is indeed a plot you have devised in the city…: Pharaoh accused

1 The inquisitive particle "do" at the beginning of Pharaoh's statement (an additional *hamzah* in Arabic) is not mentioned explicitly in the text of the verse, but it is implied. The above English translation of the verse is based on this interpretation. If we do not assume the "do" to be implied, it means that Pharaoh told them, with a tone of rebuke and disgust: "You have professed faith in Him before…" Either way, the meaning is the same. (Trans.)

them of conspiracy and collusion in the city. The reason why he specified *in the city* was that prior to coming to the capital, the magicians were dispersed across the country, and had not met Moses. Therefore, if they had agreed over something, it must have occurred after their gathering in the city. They met Moses for the first time in Pharaoh's capital after they were summoned by Pharaoh's heralds. Their charge, according to Pharaoh, was that they plotted against him and his crew. They wanted to take hold of the capital and drive away its people.

First Pharaoh rebuked them for their belief: *Do you profess faith in Him before I permit you?* Then he accused them of a collective conspiracy to expel the residents of the city from it: *It is indeed a plot…* This means that they are guilty of causing mischief in the land (*ifsād fī al-arḍ*), which gives Pharaoh the justification to treat and penalize them with the most excruciating punishments.

… Soon you will know: This is an expression of threat.

لَأُقَطِّعَنَّ أَيْدِيَكُمْ وَأَرْجُلَكُمْ مِنْ خِلَافٍ ثُمَّ لَأُصَلِّبَنَّكُمْ أَجْمَعِينَ ﴿١٢٤﴾

(7:124) "***Surely I will cut off your hands and feet on opposite sides, and then I will surely crucify all of you.***"

Pharaoh's threat here is emphasized in multiple ways. He first threatened to cut off their hands and feet on opposite sides, meaning the right hand and the left foot, or the left hand and the right foot. That is, cutting off one of each limb on a different side than the other limb.

His second threat was to crucify them. When they crucified a criminal, they would first torture him, then they would fix him on a piece of wood, and would raise it on its base on the ground so that everyone would see him and learn a lesson. We discussed this in detail under the story of Prophet Jesus in Sūrah Āl-i ʿImrān.[1]

قَالُوا إِنَّا إِلَىٰ رَبِّنَا مُنْقَلِبُونَ ﴿١٢٥﴾ وَمَا تَنْقِمُ مِنَّا إِلَّا أَنْ آمَنَّا بِآيَاتِ رَبِّنَا لَمَّا جَاءَتْنَا ۚ رَبَّنَا أَفْرِغْ عَلَيْنَا صَبْرًا وَتَوَفَّنَا مُسْلِمِينَ ﴿١٢٦﴾

(7:125-126) ***They said, "Indeed we shall return to our Lord. You are vindictive toward us only because we have believed in the signs of our***

1 See the author's last footnote on volume 6 (1st ed.), pp. 186-187 of the English translation, under verses 3:79-80. (Trans.)

Lord, when they came to us." "Our Lord! Pour patience upon us, and let us die as submitters."

This is the magicians' response to Pharaoh, where they render his scheme void, and disarm him of any further argument. They said: You threaten us with punishment because of our faith in our Lord, which is what you resent about us. You suppose that your punishment is bad for us because we will lose our life through torture and pain. But this is not bad for us, because we will be returning to our Lord, to live a happy life in His proximity. We have no fault except what *you* suppose to be our fault, which is believing in our Lord. Hence, there is only good expecting us.

They said, "Indeed we shall return to our Lord": This shows their belief in afterlife.

You are vindictive* (tanqimu, from naqm) *toward us only because we have believed in the signs of our Lord, when they came to us"…: They described the staff in the plural: *the signs of our Lord*. This shows that they found each aspect of Moses' miracle as a separate sign of God: it first turned into a python, then swallowed their ropes and staffs one by one, and then turned back to its original form.

Naqm means "dislike, resentment, enmity." When one dislikes and resents someone, it is said *naqima minu*. Its plural forms are *yanqimu* and *yanqamu*.

Instead of feeling intimidated and fretful by Pharaoh's threats, the magicians were taken into a spiritual rapture through their attraction to the divine. They resorted to their Lord in response to Pharaoh's decision to torture and kill them.

… Our Lord! Pour patience upon us…: Grant us the strength to bear the severe punishment that he is intending to inflict upon us.

… and let us die as submitters: In case he ends up killing us.

… Pour* (afrigh, from ifrāgh) *patience upon us…: Their prayer involves a metaphor. It is as though they are containers, and patience is water which is to be poured down upon them. *Ifrāgh* is to pour down a liquid into a container to the brim. They made this request so that God might bless them with such patience that would enable them to handle any pain or punishment that may befell them, without any anxiety or disturbance.

They demonstrated the most astonishing feat and miracle in the way they directly spoke up to Pharaoh. We are talking about a ruthless tyrant who used to claim, *I am your supreme lord* (79:24), and who was worshiped

by the entire kingdom of Egypt. The magicians saw his magnificent power and influence, but they did not budge. Instead, they voiced their argument freely and courageously, with peaceful hearts, dignified souls, strong determinations, solid faith, profound knowledge, and expressive speech. It would be very instructive for the reader to closely examine this part of their story—where they talk to Pharaoh directly—as described in this sūrah, and also in Sūrah Ṭā-Hā and Sūrah al-Shuʿarāʾ.[1] What God has narrated from them in these verses would reveal abundant knowledge, sublime spiritual states, and noble moral virtues. If it were not beyond the scope of this work, I would have discussed some of these points here. But the reader should wait a while.[2]

Examining Narrations

The above verses comprise a brief account of the following main elements of Prophet Moses' mission:

(1) He was appointed as a messenger, along with his brother Aaron, and dispatched to Pharaoh.
(2) He was given the two miracles of the staff and the white hand, which he showed Pharaoh.
(3) Pharaoh gathered the magicians and put up their sorcery against Moses.
(4) God made Moses' miracle triumph over the magicians'.
(5) The magicians believed in Moses.

These points are reflected in the narrations, reported through both Shia and Sunni chains of transmission. However, the narrations also include some unusual accounts that are not found in the Qur'an. For instance, it is said:

(1) The staff of Moses was from an Ās tree (myrtle) in paradise.
(2) His staff was initially Adam's. It was passed down until it reached Shuʿayb, and he gave it to Moses.
(3) It was Adam's staff. An angel gave it to Moses when he set out for Midian. At night it used to glow [and show him the way].

1 See verses 20:72-76 and 26:50-51. (Trans.)

2 See volume 27, pp. 251ff, and volume 30, p. 42 of the English translation. (Trans.)

During the day, he would strike the earth with it, and it would give him food.
(4) The staff used to speak whenever Moses wanted it to speak.
(5) When it turned into a snake before Pharaoh, the distance between its two jaws was 12 cubits. Other narrations say 40 or 80 cubits.
(6) The snake could rise one mile toward the sky.
(7) When it opened its mouth, one side of its lips would be on the ground, and the other side would extend to the roof of Pharaoh's palace.
(8) It grasped Pharaoh's court with its fangs, and attacked the people. As they rushed to escape, 25,000 of them died.
(9) The snake was 80 cubits long.
(10) It was as large as the city.
(11) When Pharaoh saw the snake, he soiled his clothes out of terror. According to some narrations, he excreted 400 times that day.
(12) Pharaoh contracted chronic diarrhea [or a stomachache] until he drowned.
(13) When Moses drew out his hand from his armpit, its light would override sunlight.

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There are also a myriad of accounts concerning the magicians:
(1) Concerning their number, it is said that they were 70, 600 to 900, 12,000, 15,000, 17,000, 19,000, over 30,000, 70,000, or 80,000.
(2) They learnt magic from two Magians (Zoroastrians) from Nineveh.
(3) The name of their leader was Simon (Shamʿūn). Other narrations say John (Yūḥannā).
(4) They had four main leaders named: Sābūr [or Sātūr], ʿĀzūr [or ʿĀdhūr], Ḥuṭḥuṭ and Miṣfá.

Concerning Pharaoh, it is said:
(1) His name was Walīd b. al-Muṣʿab b. al-Rayyān. He was originally from Iṣṭakhr in Persia. Other accounts say that he was Egyptian.
(2) The Pharaoh at the time of Prophet Moses was the same Pharaoh who ruled Egypt at the time of Prophet Joseph. He lived 400 years, without getting old, and without any hair of his turning white.
(3) He built several nested cities and citadels to safeguard himself against Moses. He made groves and woods between them and filled them with lions to protect him from Moses. When God sent

Moses to Pharaoh, he entered the first city and the lions saw him, but they wagged their tail in docility and turned away. As he came to the walls of each subsequent city, the gate opened for him, until he reached the palace where Pharaoh was residing. Moses sat there at his gate, while he was wearing a woolen cloak and holding his staff. When the porter came out, Moses told him, "Ask permission for me to enter and meet Pharaoh." The porter ignored him. Moses explained, "I am the messenger of the Lord of the worlds," but the porter still ignored him. Moses waited there as long as God willed, and kept asking the porter to get permission for him to enter. As he insisted on his request, the porter said, "Didn't the Lord of all the worlds find anyone other than you to send [as His messenger]?" There Moses became angry. He struck the door with his staff, whereby all the doors between him and Pharaoh opened. Pharaoh saw him from his seat and said, "Let him in!" Moses went in, while Pharaoh was reclining on a very high couch, 80 cubits above the ground. "I have been sent to you as the messenger of the Lord of the worlds." "Produce a sign, if you are among the truthful," Pharaoh demanded. So Moses threw his staff, which had two branches. It suddenly turned into a snake, with one branch positioned on the ground, and the other branch extending above Pharaoh's court. Pharaoh looked at its stomach, and saw fire flaming inside. As the snake moved toward him, Pharaoh lost control of his bowels and screamed, "Restrain it Moses!"

There are other strange accounts found in the narrations concerning this story. Most of them are things that are not found in the Qur'an. Rejecting them would be based on unlikelihood, and accepting them would be based on naïve optimism about anything that is narrated. These accounts are not mass-transmitted (*mutawātir*). Nor are they supported by definite evidence surrounding them. Rather, most of them are weak (*ḍaʿīf*) in one way or another, such as being *mursal* (with an incomplete chain of transmission), *mawqūf* (terminating with the Companions, without connecting to the Prophet), and so on. Not to mention the internal contradiction between them, which one can see in our summary above. Hence, we better disregard them.[1]

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1 This means suspending judgment about them, and not concerning ourselves with them. (Trans.)

Verses 127-137

وَ قالَ الْمَلَأُ مِنْ قَوْمِ فِرْعَوْنَ أَ تَذَرُ مُوسى وَ قَوْمَهُ لِيُفْسِدُوا فِي الْأَرْضِ وَ يَذَرَكَ وَ آلِهَتَكَ قالَ سَنُقَتِّلُ أَبْناءَهُمْ وَ نَسْتَحْيِي نِساءَهُمْ وَ إِنَّا فَوْقَهُمْ قاهِرُونَ ﴿١٢٧﴾ قالَ مُوسى لِقَوْمِهِ اسْتَعِينُوا بِاللَّهِ وَ اصْبِرُوا إِنَّ الْأَرْضَ لِلَّهِ يُورِثُها مَنْ يَشاءُ مِنْ عِبادِهِ وَ الْعاقِبَةُ لِلْمُتَّقِينَ ﴿١٢٨﴾ قالُوا أُوذِينا مِنْ قَبْلِ أَنْ تَأْتِيَنا وَ مِنْ بَعْدِ ما جِئْتَنا قالَ عَسى رَبُّكُمْ أَنْ يُهْلِكَ عَدُوَّكُمْ وَ يَسْتَخْلِفَكُمْ فِي الْأَرْضِ فَيَنْظُرَ كَيْفَ تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿١٢٩﴾ وَ لَقَدْ أَخَذْنا آلَ فِرْعَوْنَ بِالسِّنِينَ وَ نَقْصٍ مِنَ الثَّمَراتِ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَذَّكَّرُونَ ﴿١٣٠﴾ فَإِذا جاءَتْهُمُ الْحَسَنَةُ قالُوا لَنا هذِهِ وَ إِنْ تُصِبْهُمْ سَيِّئَةٌ يَطَّيَّرُوا بِمُوسى وَ مَنْ مَعَهُ أَلا إِنَّما طائِرُهُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ وَ لكِنَّ أَكْثَرَهُمْ لا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿١٣١﴾ وَ قالُوا مَهْما تَأْتِنا بِهِ مِنْ آيَةٍ لِتَسْحَرَنا بِها فَما نَحْنُ لَكَ بِمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿١٣٢﴾ فَأَرْسَلْنا عَلَيْهِمُ الطُّوفانَ وَ الْجَرادَ وَ الْقُمَّلَ وَ الضَّفادِعَ وَ الدَّمَ آياتٍ مُفَصَّلاتٍ فَاسْتَكْبَرُوا وَ كانُوا قَوْماً مُجْرِمِينَ ﴿١٣٣﴾ وَ لَمَّا وَقَعَ عَلَيْهِمُ الرِّجْزُ قالُوا يا مُوسَى ادْعُ لَنا رَبَّكَ بِما عَهِدَ عِنْدَكَ لَئِنْ كَشَفْتَ عَنَّا الرِّجْزَ لَنُؤْمِنَنَّ لَكَ وَ لَنُرْسِلَنَّ مَعَكَ بَنِي إِسْرائِيلَ ﴿١٣٤﴾ فَلَمَّا كَشَفْنا عَنْهُمُ الرِّجْزَ إِلى أَجَلٍ هُمْ بالِغُوهُ إِذا هُمْ يَنْكُثُونَ ﴿١٣٥﴾ فَانْتَقَمْنا مِنْهُمْ فَأَغْرَقْناهُمْ فِي الْيَمِّ بِأَنَّهُمْ كَذَّبُوا بِآياتِنا وَ كانُوا عَنْها غافِلِينَ ﴿١٣٦﴾ وَ أَوْرَثْنَا الْقَوْمَ الَّذِينَ كانُوا يُسْتَضْعَفُونَ مَشارِقَ الْأَرْضِ وَ مَغارِبَهَا الَّتِي بارَكْنا فِيها وَ تَمَّتْ كَلِمَتُ رَبِّكَ الْحُسْنى عَلى بَنِي إِسْرائِيلَ بِما صَبَرُوا وَ دَمَّرْنا ما كانَ يَصْنَعُ فِرْعَوْنُ وَ قَوْمُهُ وَ ما كانُوا يَعْرِشُونَ ﴿١٣٧﴾

(7:127) *The elite of Pharaoh's people said, "Will you leave Moses and his people to cause corruption in the land, and to abandon you and your gods?" He said, "We will kill their sons and spare their women, and indeed we are dominant over them."*

(7:128) *Moses said to his people, "Turn to Allah for help and be patient. The earth indeed belongs to Allah, and He gives its inheritance to whomever He wills of His servants, and the outcome will be in favor of the Godwary."*

(7:129) *They said, "We were tormented before you came to us and [also] after you came to us." He said, "Maybe your Lord will destroy your enemy and make you successors in the land, and then He will see how you act."*

(7:130) *Certainly We afflicted Pharaoh's clan with droughts and loss of produce, so that they may take admonition.*

(7:131) *So whenever the good came to them, they would say, "This is our due." And if any ill visited them, they took it for an ill omen attending Moses and those who were with him. Look! Indeed the cause of their ill omens is with Allah, but most of them do not know.*

(7:132) *And they said, "Whatever sign you may bring us to bewitch us, we are not going to believe you."*

(7:133) *So We sent against them a flood and locusts, lice, frogs and blood, as distinct signs. But they acted arrogantly, and they were a guilty lot.*

(7:134) *Whenever a plague fell upon them, they would say, "O Moses, invoke your Lord for us by the covenant He has made with you. If you remove the plague from us, we will certainly believe in you and let the Children of Israel go along with you."*

(7:135) *But when We removed the plague from them until a term that they should have completed, behold: they would break their promise.*

(7:136) *So We took vengeance on them and drowned them in the sea, for they denied Our signs and were oblivious to them.*

(7:137) *We made the people who were abased the heirs to the east and west of the land which We had blessed, and your Lord's best word [of promise] was fulfilled for the Children of Israel because of their patience, and We obliterated what Pharaoh and his people had built and what they used to erect.*

Introduction

These verses provide a synopsis of the events that transpired between Moses and Pharaoh during Moses' stay in Egypt among his people, after he had announced his mission, had called Pharaoh and his clan to God, and had demanded the freedom of the Israelites. He showed them several miracles, one after another, until God delivered him and his people. God drowned Pharaoh and his hosts, and made the Children of Israel inheritors to the east and west of the blessed land.

Commentary

وَقَالَ الْمَلَأُ مِنْ قَوْمِ فِرْعَوْنَ أَتَذَرُ مُوسَىٰ وَقَوْمَهُ لِيُفْسِدُوا فِي الْأَرْضِ وَيَذَرَكَ وَآلِهَتَكَ ۚ قَالَ سَنُقَتِّلُ أَبْنَاءَهُمْ وَنَسْتَحْيِي نِسَاءَهُمْ وَإِنَّا فَوْقَهُمْ قَاهِرُونَ ﴿١٢٧﴾

(7:127) ***The elite of Pharaoh's people said, "Will you leave Moses and his people to cause corruption in the land, and to abandon you and your gods?" He said, "We will kill their sons and spare their women, and indeed we are dominant over them."***

With this statement, the elite of Pharaoh meant to entice and encourage him to exterminate Moses and his people. But Pharaoh rejected this by saying: We shall not be concerned with killing them, because we are dominant over them anyway. Instead, we will re-establish our previous punishment on them: we shall kill their sons and spare their women.

… and indeed we are dominant over them: From this sentence we can deduce that their request was extermination in particular—and not any kind of punishment. Otherwise, this sentence would not quite fit the context.

… and to abandon you and your gods* (ālihataka)*…: By adding this, they wanted to emphasize their request further, and provoke Pharaoh more to kill the Israelites. The meaning is: Besides causing mischief in the land, Moses is disregarding the service of you and your gods.

This expression shows that even though Pharaoh had claimed to be a god himself, and had forced the people to serve him, he had other gods of his own whom he used to worship. There are other examples of this in the history of other nations. For example, the same behavior is narrated concerning the tribal leaders and the chiefs of communities in ancient Rome and elsewhere. Their subordinates in their families and clan used to

worship them, while they would worship their ancestors and other idols in turn. Similarly, some gods of the idolaters were deemed to overlord one or multiple other lords. For instance, parent gods used to have lordship over their children [who were gods themselves].

Objection: We read elsewhere in the Qur'an that God narrates from Pharaoh: *I am your supreme lord* (79:24); *I do not know of any god for you other than me* (28:38). These verses apparently show that he had not adopted any god for himself, but had decreed that only he should be served. That is why some exegetes have suggested that Pharaoh was an atheist who did not believe in a creator for the world. Thus he had ordered his people to not worship any god whatsoever, but instead worship him alone. In this light, the word *ālihatika* (your gods) has also been recited as *ilāhatika* (your worship), where *ilāhah* rhymes with *ʿibādah* (service, worship) and is synonymous with it.[1]

Response: It is more consistent to say that his claim to being an exclusive god—*I do not know of any god for you other than me* (28:38)—pertained only to the general public in Egypt. He presented himself as the only god who directs *their* affairs in particular, not that there is no other god to manage *his* life. This was exactly the worldview of the polytheists: they believed in a separate lord for every part of the creation, such as the sky, the earth, the sea and the land; all different tribes of people; and various events such as peace, war, love and beauty. And every community adopted and worshiped their own pantheon according to their needs. For instance, people living on seashores would serve the lord of the sea and the lord of hurricanes.

The meaning is: "People of Egypt, your Lord is *me*, not the one assumed by Moses, whom he claims to be a messenger of." This interpretation is confirmed by internal evidence from the very verse that has been drawn upon: *Pharaoh said, "O [members of the] elite! I do not know of any god for you other than me. Hāmān, light for me a fire over clay, and build me a tower so that I may take a look at Moses' god, and indeed I consider him to be a liar!"* (28:38). The verse apparently shows that Pharaoh was uncertain about him being a god for Moses. It should be noted that what he said—*I do not know of any god for you other than me* (28:38)—is a negation,

1 The meaning would be: "Are you going to let Moses and his people abandon you and your *ʿibādah* (service, worship)?" This paragraph is apparently a summary of al-Ālūsī's *Rūḥ al-maʿānī*. (Trans.)

not an affirmation. He negated his knowledge about the existence of any other god; he did not affirm his knowledge of the non-existence of any other god. Overall, his statement does not deny gods other than himself.

The view that Pharaoh was an atheist[1] can apparently be traced to *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr* by al-Rāzī, where he says:

What seems to me is that we cannot say Pharaoh was insufficient in intellect, because then it would not be wise for God to send a messenger to him. And if he was intelligent and rational, then he could not possibly believe—in himself—that he was the creator of the heavens and the earth. Likewise, a large community of rational people would not believe this about him. Any sound reason would undoubtedly realize the falsity of this view.

It is more plausible to say that he was an atheist who did not believe in a creator. Perhaps he believed that the stars [that is, astral spirits] determine the operation of the lower world [of nature]. But within this lower world, it is Pharaoh himself who is in charge of the affairs of all beings and his people. Hence, when he said: *I am your supreme lord* (79:24), what he meant was that I am the one who is in charge of you, feeds you, and has given you whatever you have. Likewise, when he said, *I do not know of any god for you other than me* (28:38), what he meant was that I do not know of anyone that you must worship except myself.

If we accept this as his religious world view, then it is possible to say that the had adopted the stars as his gods. He used to seek their favor by worshiping idols that represented them, just as star-worshipers do. This way, we can keep the apparent meaning of the phrase in this verse: *to abandon you and your gods?* (7:127). This is what occurs to me with respect to the current discussion.

There are a few mistakes and confusions in al-Rāzī's discussion: (1) What the star-worshipers and idol-worshipers meant by "god" or "lord" was not the same as the creator. Their gods and lords were deemed to be not the *creators* of the heavens and the earth, but the *directors* of some affairs in the universe. Al-Rāzī has pointed this out correctly in the last part of his discussion. (2) Atheists did not and do not worship the stars. (3) Star-worshipers and Sabeans do not deny the existence of a creator.

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1 This is a translation of *dahrī*, which can also be translated as "materialist." (Trans.)

The right view, as we said above, is that Pharaoh considered himself to be the lord of Egypt and its people. His exclusivism was that there is no other lord who *directs* the affairs of his people at the grass roots, not that there is no God Who has *created* them and the universe.[1]

… He said, "We will kill their sons and spare their women…": Pharaoh assured his elite that he would reenact his previous punishment on the Children of Israel. That was killing their sons and sparing their women as maidservants.

… and indeed we are dominant over them": By saying this, Pharaoh comforted the agitation that had aroused in the hearts of his elite, and soothed their anger.

قَالَ مُوسَىٰ لِقَوْمِهِ اسْتَعِينُوا بِاللَّهِ وَاصْبِرُوا ۖ إِنَّ الْأَرْضَ لِلَّهِ يُورِثُهَا مَنْ يَشَاءُ مِنْ عِبَادِهِ ۖ وَالْعَاقِبَةُ لِلْمُتَّقِينَ ﴿١٢٨﴾

(7:128) ***Moses said to his people, "Turn to Allah for help and be patient. The earth indeed belongs to Allah, and He gives its inheritance to whomever He wills of His servants, and the outcome will be in favor of the Godwary."***

Moses encouraged and provoked the Children of Israel to ask God to help them achieve their goal, which was liberation from their enslavement and bondage under Pharaoh's clan. He further prompted them to be patient in the face of difficulties and all kinds of punishment threatened by Pharaoh. Patience is the guide to good and the vanguard of all relief.

… The earth indeed belongs to Allah, and He gives its inheritance to whomever He wills…: This is Moses' justification and explanation for his previous order. The meaning is: Pharaoh does not own the earth to give it to whomever he wishes, and withhold whomever he wants from its enjoyments. It rather belongs to God, and He makes whomever He wants inherit it. God's custom throughout history has been to only allow His Godwary servants to have a good end. In your case, having *taqwá*

1 There is no mention of Pharaoh's gods or idols in the Qur'an. As some exegetes have suggested, it is likely that the verse refers to some statues of Pharaoh that he had raised across Egypt, so that the people in other cities could worship him through them. This can be supported by his claim: *"O my people! Does not the kingdom of Egypt belong to me?"* (43:51). (Trans.)

(Godwariness, self-restraint) means turning to God for help, and being patient in His way. If you demonstrate this, He will make you inheritors to the land which is now in the hands of Pharaoh's clan.

… and the outcome* (al-ʿāqibah) *will be in favor of the Godwary": Moses added this to clarify and complement his previous statement. *ʿĀqibah* (outcome, consequence, aftermath) is "what comes after (*yaʿqibu*) something," just as *bādiʾah* (beginning, offset) is "what comes at the beginning of (*yabdaʾu*) something." The unconditional form of *al-ʿāqibah* implies that good end exclusively belongs to *muttaqīn* (the Godwary, the self-restrained, the pious). This is a decree of divine custom in the universe. God has given the world such order that leads every species to the purpose of its existence and the happiness for which it was created. If a being pursues the path that it is hard-wired to pursue, and does not deviate from the direction that has been set for it, it will certainly reach its ultimate happiness. This is also applicable to humankind as one of the species. If humans follow the way that is required of them by their *fiṭrah* (primal nature, innate disposition, initial makeup), God will lead them to their good end, will make them live a good life, and will guide them to every good that they would wish. The key is that they must restrain themselves from transgressing and overstepping the boundaries of God's path to any other path. They must avoid rejecting His signs and causing corruption in the land.

قَالُوا أُوذِينَا مِنْ قَبْلِ أَنْ تَأْتِيَنَا وَمِنْ بَعْدِ مَا جِئْتَنَا ۚ قَالَ عَسَىٰ رَبُّكُمْ أَنْ يُهْلِكَ
عَدُوَّكُمْ وَيَسْتَخْلِفَكُمْ فِي الْأَرْضِ فَيَنْظُرَ كَيْفَ تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿١٢٩﴾

(7:129) ***They said, "We were tormented before you came to us* (taʾtiyanā, from ityān) *and [also] after you came to us* (jiʾtanā, from majīʾ)*." He said, "Maybe your Lord will destroy your enemy and make you successors in the land, and then He will see how you act."***

Here the Children of Israel are complaining to Moses. *Ityān* and *majīʾ* are synonymous in this verse [where they both mean "coming"]. Using different terms here is for variety [as an eloquent technique]. Some exegetes have said that *ityān* is meant in its transitive sense (bringing), unlike *majīʾ* which is intransitive (coming), and the implied meaning is: "Before you brought us *the miracles*, and after you have come." However, this interpretation implies some omission in the verse, for which there is

no evidence. Furthermore, what they wanted to say was that the arrival of Moses did not have the effect which God had promised would have: saving them from the hardship and humiliation of bondage. Their pains and burdens continued to strain them despite Moses' coming. This idea is clearly irrelevant to the miracles that he brought.[1]

… He said, "Maybe your Lord will destroy your enemy and make you successors in the land, and then He will see how you act": This is Moses' response to what they said: *We were tormented*…. He comforts them and inspires them with hope. This statement is effectively a reiteration of what he said in the last verse: *Turn to Allah for help and be patient. The earth indeed belongs to Allah…* (7:128). It is as though he said: What I ordered you—to be Godwary in the way of your goal—is a living and immutable instruction [which I insist on]. If you act upon it, we can hope that God would destroy your enemies and make you succeed them in the land as their inheritors. Meanwhile, God would not choose you without any basis, and would not honor you without any condition or stipulation. Rather, He would be testing you through this kingdom, dominion and succession. He would want to see how you will act. God says: *and We make such vicissitudes rotate among mankind, so that Allah may ascertain those who have faith, and that He may take witnesses from among you* (3:140).

This is one of the instances where the Qur'an refutes Jewish beliefs. They hold that their high status with God is inviolable, and not subject to any condition or requirement. They view the descendants of Jacob as the chosen people of God, to whom the Holy Land has been given as if its ownership was transferred to them from God in a way that it cannot be transferred or revoked.

وَلَقَدْ أَخَذْنَا آلَ فِرْعَوْنَ بِالسِّنِينَ وَنَقْصٍ مِنَ الثَّمَرَاتِ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَذَّكَّرُونَ ﴿١٣٠﴾

(7:130) ***Certainly*** **(la-qad)** ***We afflicted Pharaoh's clan with droughts*** **(bil-sinīn, plural of sanah)** ***and loss of produce, so that they may take admonition.***

Sanah (lit. year) means "drought, famine." It was originally called "the year of drought" (*sanat al-qaḥṭ*). Then people referred to that [notorious]

1 Perhaps one difference is that *atá* (to go to) is used at the onset of moving toward something, while *jāʾa* (to come to, to arrive at) is used when one reaches there. (Trans.)

year simply as "the year" (*al-sanah*, in a definite form). Later, through repeated usage, the word *sanah* became an established term for drought and famine.

The *āl* (clan, people, family) of Pharaoh were people who had some special connection to him, which would be the Egyptians [that is, the non-Israelites]. The letter *lām* at the beginning of the verse implies a vow for emphasis. God swears that He seized them with several years of drought and low yield of produce so that they may awaken. These were two miracles that God sent to Pharaoh's clan. The context suggests that there was some pause and interruption between these droughts. That is why the word *sinīn* (droughts) is in the plural, because if there is a single drought that extends over several years, it would not be called "droughts" in the plural. In addition, the next verse—*So whenever the good came to them* (7:131)—apparently refers to good times and bad times in sequence and cycles.

فَإِذَا جَاءَتْهُمُ الْحَسَنَةُ قَالُوا لَنَا هَٰذِهِ ۖ وَإِنْ تُصِبْهُمْ سَيِّئَةٌ يَطَّيَّرُوا بِمُوسَىٰ وَمَنْ مَعَهُ ۗ أَلَا إِنَّمَا طَائِرُهُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ وَلَٰكِنَّ أَكْثَرَهُمْ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿١٣١﴾

(7:131) ***So whenever the good came to them, they would say, "This is our due." And if any ill visited them, they took it for an ill omen attending Moses and those who were with him. Look! Indeed the cause of their ill omens is with Allah, but most of them do not know.***

Whenever they had a time of prosperity, abundance and wealth—after a drought and loss of produce—they would say, *"This is our due,"* meaning that they would give themselves the credit for that. We specified "after a drought and loss of produce" because this is human nature. We do not pay attention to a blessing and fortune as being a blessing and fortune, and we do not appreciate its value, until we experience a misfortune that is the opposite of it. Likewise, what instigated Pharaoh's clan to notice their bounties and good things, and to ascribe them to themselves, was that they saw their opposites.

Hence, the order is that first they would face a new affliction that they had not seen before, which they would ascribe to the evil auspices of Moses and the people with him. Then, when the bad times were replaced by good times, they would ascribe it to their own merit. This is the order by which things occurred: first evil and ill augury, then good and vainglory.

Meanwhile, this can be traced to an opposite order that was inherent in them: the fact that they held Moses responsible for their misfortune reveals their preconception. Since they had grown up in comfort and were accustomed to abundance, fertility and plentitude, they had taken for granted that they were entitled to prosperity. If this notion is not deeply rooted in one's heart, they would not blame others when it is their turn for misfortune. One would not be so resentful of discomfort and hardship if they are not so habituated to comfort and ease. This could explain the order and wording used in the verse:

So whenever* (fa-idhā) *the good* (al-ḥasanah) *came to them, they would say, "This is our due." And if* (in) *any ill* (sayyiʾah) *visited them, they took it for an ill omen* (yaṭṭayyarū, from taṭayyur) *attending Moses and those who were with him…: There are a few subtle points here which confirm what we said in the last paragraph: (1) The order of events: God first mentions their conceited times of bounty, and then their afflictions for which they accused others. (2) The word *idhā* (when) shows that the good times were taken to be the norm and the default condition for them. Contrast this with the Arabic conditional particle *in* (if), which shows that the bad times were deemed to be conditional and uncertain. (3) The definite article *al-* in *al-ḥasanah* ("the" in *the good*) shows that goodness—as a genus—was something that was known to them [and they were accustomed to]. On the contrary, *sayyiʾah* is used in the indefinite form (*nakirah*), which implies rarity and coincidence.

Taṭayyur means "ascribing misfortune and ill luck to something." It is derived from the word *ṭayr* (bird) based on having some relationship with that root. It was common to view some birds, like the crow, as portending evil. That is how the word *taṭayyur* was derived from this root, and was later generalized to beyond birds. It means "taking something as bad luck and portending evil." Thus one of the established meanings of the word *ṭāʾir* (lit. bird) is "share" (*naṣīb*) in its general sense, or "share of evil and bad luck" in particular. We see this word in the last part of the verse:

… Look! Indeed the cause of their ill omens* (ṭāʾiruhum) *is with Allah, but most of them do not know: Their real *ṭāʾir* (bad luck) is their true share of evil, which would be their punishment, which lies at the hand of God. *But most of them do not know* because they think that what they acquire through their actions perish, disappear, and is not preserved against them.

Some exegetes have offered other interpretations for *ṭāʾir* in this verse,

such as "the record of deeds," which is called *ṭāʾir* elsewhere in the Qur'an.[1] However, what we said is more consistent with the verse's context.

وَقَالُوا مَهْمَا تَأْتِنَا بِهِ مِنْ آيَةٍ لِتَسْحَرَنَا بِهَا فَمَا نَحْنُ لَكَ بِمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿١٣٢﴾

(7:132) ***And they said, "Whatever* (mahmā)** ***sign you may bring us to bewitch us, we are not going to believe you."***

The word *mahmā* is a conditional operator that means "whatever, anything." They made this statement to disappoint Moses about their belief—regardless of any miracle that he may show them. Their expression also involves derision, because they equated his "signs" with "bewitchment." They meant that Moses' purpose in bringing miracles was to bewitch them. The implied meaning is: What you perform is magic, but you call it signs [of God and the truth].

فَأَرْسَلْنَا عَلَيْهِمُ الطُّوفَانَ وَالْجَرَادَ وَالْقُمَّلَ وَالضَّفَادِعَ وَالدَّمَ آيَاتٍ مُفَصَّلَاتٍ فَاسْتَكْبَرُوا وَكَانُوا قَوْمًا مُجْرِمِينَ ﴿١٣٣﴾

(7:133) ***So We sent against them a flood* (al-ṭūfān)** ***and locusts, lice* (al-qummal)*****, frogs and blood, as distinct signs. But they acted arrogantly, and they were a guilty lot.***

According to al-Rāghib, *ṭūfān* is any event that besieges someone, but it is more commonly used for abundant water. According to *Majmaʿ al-bayān*, it is a flood that covers the land, and is derived from the word *ṭawf* (to circle, to circumambulate).

Two meanings have been suggested for *qummāl*: (1) large monkeys; (2) tiny flies. The word could also be *qaml*, which is well-known (lice). The other terms—locusts, frogs and blood—are also well-known.

… as distinct signs* (mufaṣṣalāt, from tafṣīl)*…: *Tafṣīl* means "to divide into separate parts that are distinct from one another." This means that each member of the whole would be distinguished and observed by itself. Therefore, this expression shows that these signs were not sent to them together and all at once. Instead, they were separated and broken up into multiple distinct events that were clearly intended as punishment, and did not occur by mere chance or coincidence.

This interpretation of "distinction" can be confirmed by the following

1 See verse 17:13; volume 25, pp. 69-70 of the English translation. (Trans.)

verse: *Whenever a plague fell upon them, they would say…* The verse suggests that each plague was warned of and forecasted by Moses. Then, when it actually occurred and befell them, they would resort to him and plead with him to pray that it may be lifted from them. They would promise him that if that plague were removed from them, they would believe in him and send the Children of Israel with him. But whenever their plague was removed, they would break their promise and breach their contract. The verse suggests such a recurrent sequence of events.

وَلَمَّا وَقَعَ عَلَيْهِمُ الرِّجْزُ قَالُوا يَا مُوسَى ادْعُ لَنَا رَبَّكَ بِمَا عَهِدَ عِنْدَكَ ۖ لَئِنْ كَشَفْتَ عَنَّا الرِّجْزَ لَنُؤْمِنَنَّ لَكَ وَلَنُرْسِلَنَّ مَعَكَ بَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ ﴿١٣٤﴾

(7:134) ***Whenever a plague*** **(al-rijz)** ***fell upon them, they would say, "O Moses, invoke your Lord for us by the covenant He has made with you. If you remove the plague from us, we will certainly believe in you and let the Children of Israel go along with you."***

Rijz means "punishment." What is meant here is the punishment that accompanied each of the *distinct signs* (7:133). After all, they were signs of punishment and wrath [not signs of blessing and mercy].

… by the covenant He has made with you…: Given the context, this means God's commitment to not reject Moses' prayers and requests. The meaning is: Call your Lord for us by the covenant that you have with Him.[1]

… If **(la-in)** ***you remove the plague from us, we will certainly believe in you and let the Children of Israel go along with you:*** This is the *ʿahd* (covenant, promise, vow) that they made with Moses in exchange for the uplifting of the plague from them. The letter *lām* at the beginning of this segment implies a vow [for emphasis].

فَلَمَّا كَشَفْنَا عَنْهُمُ الرِّجْزَ إِلَىٰ أَجَلٍ هُمْ بَالِغُوهُ إِذَا هُمْ يَنْكُثُونَ ﴿١٣٥﴾

(7:135) ***But when We removed the plague from them until a term that they should have completed, behold: they would break their promise*** **(yankuthūna, from nakth).**

Nakth means "breaking a promise, breaching a contract."

… until a term **(ajal)** ***that they should have completed…:*** This

1 In other words: "Pray to your Lord for us, based on the noble position that He has given you, and the high status that you have in His eyes." (Trans.)

qualification pertains to *when We had removed*. It shows that their contract was time-bound. It is as though Moses told them: "God will remove the plague from you on the condition that you believe and send the Children of Israel with me, and you have until such-and-such a time to fulfill this." Or perhaps Pharaoh and his clan stipulated such terms. *But when We removed the plague from them* and their given time was up, they would break their promise and breach the contract that they had made with God and Moses.[1] The rest of the meaning should be clear.[2]

فَانْتَقَمْنَا مِنْهُمْ فَأَغْرَقْنَاهُمْ فِي الْيَمِّ بِأَنَّهُمْ كَذَّبُوا بِآيَاتِنَا وَكَانُوا عَنْهَا غَافِلِينَ ﴿١٣٦﴾

(7:136) ***So We took vengeance on them and drowned them in the sea* (al-yamm)*, for they denied Our signs and were oblivious to them.***

Yamm is synonymous with *baḥr* (sea). The rest of the verse should be clear.

وَأَوْرَثْنَا الْقَوْمَ الَّذِينَ كَانُوا يُسْتَضْعَفُونَ مَشَارِقَ الْأَرْضِ وَمَغَارِبَهَا الَّتِي بَارَكْنَا فِيهَا ۖ وَتَمَّتْ كَلِمَتُ رَبِّكَ الْحُسْنَىٰ عَلَىٰ بَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ بِمَا صَبَرُوا ۖ وَدَمَّرْنَا مَا كَانَ يَصْنَعُ فِرْعَوْنُ وَقَوْمُهُ وَمَا كَانُوا يَعْرِشُونَ ﴿١٣٧﴾

(7:137) ***We made the people who were abased the heirs to the east and west of the land which We had blessed, and your Lord's best word [of promise] was fulfilled for the Children of Israel because of their patience, and We obliterated what Pharaoh and his people had built and what they***

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1 Their promise included two clauses: (1) to believe; (2) to release the Israelites and let them go with Moses. The first clause did not require time to be fulfilled, but the second one did. (Trans.)

2 The author's interpretation is based on the word *ajal* meaning "a fixed and determinate term," which is its technical meaning in Islamic jurisprudence. In the Qur'an, however, *ajal* often means "a limited but indeterminate term." The apparent meaning of the verse is that they would be soft and lenient toward Moses and his people for a while, only for a limited duration (*ajal*), after which they would revert to their old cruelty and defiance. The verse could be better translated as follows: "Then, when We removed the plague from them, they would maintain up to some point, but then behold: they would break their promise." (Trans.)

used to erect.

The "land" in this verse apparently refers to the Levant. This can be inferred from its description as *which We had blessed*, because the only land that God has described to be blessed is the Holy Land, which is the region around Palestine. The Holy Kaʿbah is also blessed in the Qur'an. The meaning is: We made the Children of Israel—who were abased and abused—inheritors of the Holy Land, from its east to its west.

God describes the Israelites as *people who were abased* in order to show His amazing act of raising the abased and empowering the weak. It would take a strong and influential ruler, assisted by abundant means and supporters, to bring such expanse of land in their possession.

… and your Lord's best word [of promise] was fulfilled…: God's "word" here refers to His decree that He will make them inherit the land, and will destroy their enemy. This divine decree is what Moses had promised them before, when he comforted and encouraged them: *Maybe your Lord will destroy your enemy and make you successors in the land* (7:129). It is also stipulated in the verse: *And We desired to show favor to those who were abased in the land, and to make them leaders, and to make them the heirs* (28:5). The "fulfillment" of a word [that is, the divine promise] is its development from a state of potentiality to actuality. God mentions *their patience* as the cause for this fulfillment.

***… and We obliterated* (dammarnā, from tadmīr) *what Pharaoh and his people had built* (kāna yaṣnaʿu) *and what they used to erect* (kānū yaʿrishūna):** *Tadmīr* is synonymous with *ihlāk* (to destroy, to annihilate). *Yaṣnaʿu* refers to what they used to build and manufacture. *Yaʿrishūna* means "building roofs" for buildings and palaces, or "making trellised (*maʿrūshah*) gardens" of vine and so on.

Examining Narrations

(1) *Majmaʿ al-bayān* says: There are several accounts here, narrated from Ibn ʿAbbās, Saʿīd b. Jubayr, Qatādah, Muḥammad b. Isḥāq b. Bashshār, and also from Imams al-Bāqir and al-Ṣādiq—as narrated by ʿAlī b. Ibrāhīm, via his chain of transmission. These reports have been mixed with one other. They say:

When the magicians converted and Pharaoh was defeated [in the contest], it only made him and his people more insistent on disbelief. Hāmān [Pharaoh's vizier] said to him, "The people have

believed in Moses. Search for anyone who has converted to his religion, and imprison them." Pharaoh imprisoned anyone who had believed in him [Moses] from the Children of Israel. Then God sent the signs upon them in sequence, and seized them with droughts and loss of produce. Then He sent the flood against them, which destroyed their houses and buildings, such that they moved outside the city and set up tents there. The Coptic houses were filled with water, but not even a drop of it entered the homes of the Children of Israel. Their farmlands were inundated, so that they could not cultivate the land. They told Moses, "Call your Lord for us, to remove the rain from us; then we will believe in you and send the Children of Israel with you." He prayed, and God removed the flood from them, but they did not believe. Hāmān said to Pharaoh, "If you leave the Children of Israel to themselves, Moses will defeat you, and your kingdom will perish" [and thus he prevented Pharaoh from fulfilling his promise]. In that year [after the flood], God caused the yields of their pastures, crops and produce to proliferate so that their towns flourished with abundance. They concluded, "That water was in fact a source of blessing and fecundity for us!" In the second year (according to ʿAlī b. Ibrāhīm), or the second month (according to other exegetes), God dispatched locusts toward them. The locusts rendered their crops and trees naked,[1] and even took away their hairs and beards. They ate their doors, their clothes and their furniture. Yet they did not enter the houses of the Children of Israel, who remained untouched by that calamity. They [the Coptics] clamored and lamented, and Pharaoh said to Moses: "Moses, call your Lord to remove the locusts from us; then I will set the Children of Israel free." Moses called his Lord, and He stopped the locusts, which had been there for one week: from one Saturday to the next.

It is said that Moses went out to an open area, and waved his staff toward the east and the west. This made the locusts return from where they had come, as though they had never been. But again,

1 It is noteworthy that *jarād* (locust) is a cognate of *tajrīd* (to bare, to make naked). The basis of this derivation should be clear. (Trans.)

Hāmān did not let Pharaoh set free the Children of Israel.
In the third year (according to ʿAlī b. Ibrāhīm), or the third month (according to other exegetes), God sent off *qummal*, which are tiny grasshoppers without any wings. They are the worst and most destructive of all [pests]. They struck all their crops and plucked them from the root. Thus their crops were gone, and they licked the farmlands entirely.[1]
It is said that Moses was ordered to walk to a sand dune in an Egyptian village called ʿAyn al-Shams. He went there, struck it with his staff, and that brought out the *qummal* against them. The insects would go into the clothes of the Coptics and bite them. Saʿīd b. Jubayr said, "*Qummal* is the lice that is found in grains." When they wanted to eat, their dish would be filled with *qummal*. If they were to take ten saddlebags (sing. *jarīb* and *jirāb*) [of wheat] to the mill, they would come out with no more than three bushels (sing. *qafīz*) [of flour].[2] They had not been afflicted with any calamity more severe than *qummal*. It came on their hairs, eyes, eyelids and eyebrows. It struck their skins as though they had smallpox. It did not allow them to rest and sleep. They screamed and cried out, so Pharaoh said to Moses: "Call your Lord! If you take away the *qummal* from us, I will let go of the Children of Israel." Moses prayed, and the *qummal* went away, which had been there for one week: from one Saturday to the next. Yet, they broke their promise.
In the fourth year—or the fourth month—God dispatched frogs against them. They entered their food and their drink. Their homes and buildings were filled with frogs. If they were to uncover any clothing, dishware, food or drink, they would find frogs in it. The frogs would jump into their pots and ruin whatever [food] was there. When they sat, they were immersed in frogs up to their chin. When they opened their mouth to speak, a frog

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1 That is, the *qummal* left no vegetation on any land whatsoever. (Trans.)

2 *Jarīb* and *qafīz* are defined differently in different places. A common ratio between them is 4:1, where a *qafīz* is approximately 230.76 kg, and a *jarīb* is about 923.04 kg. This means that their flour was only 7.5% of their wheat. The ratio is also defined as 10:1, which would make their yield only 3%. (Trans.)

would hop into their mouth. When they opened their mouth to eat, a frog would snatch away the food before it reached their mouth. Thus they suffered tremendously from that. When they saw that, they pleaded about it to Moses, "This time we will repent and will not revert. Call God to take away the frogs from us. We will believe in you and send off the Children of Israel with you." Moses took several oaths and vows from them. Then he prayed to his Lord, Who removed the frogs from them, which had been there for one week: from one Saturday to the next. But they again breached their contract and reverted to disbelief.

The fifth year God sent blood against them: there was blood flowing in the Nile. The Coptics would see blood, but the Israelites would see water. When an Israelite wanted to drink from it, it was water; but when a Coptic wanted to drink from it, it was blood. A Coptic would tell an Israelite, "Take the water in your mouth, and then pour it into mine," but as the water was being poured into the Coptic's mouth, it would turn into blood. Pharaoh was pressed by thirst, so he resorted desperately to chewing on fresh vegetation. But as he would chew it, the water would transform to blood in his mouth. They suffered that for seven days, when they only drank and ate blood. Zayd b. Aslam said, "The punishment of blood for them was nose-bleeding." They went to Moses and said, "Call your Lord for us to remove this blood from us. Then we will believe in you and send the Children of Israel with you." But when God uplifted the blood from them, they neither believed, nor released the Children of Israel.

(2) Concerning *If you remove the plague* (al-rijz) *from us, we will certainly believe in you* (7:134) Imam al-Ṣādiq said: "*Rijz* means *thalj* (snow)." Then he added, "The cities of Khurāsān are cities of *rijz*."[1]

Author's comment: This narration does not quite correspond with the verse.

almizan.org

1 *Tafsīr al-ʿAyyāshī*, on the authority of Muḥammad b. Qays.

Verses 138-154

وَ جاوَزْنا بِبَنِي إِسْرائِيلَ الْبَحْرَ فَأَتَوْا عَلى قَوْمٍ يَعْكُفُونَ عَلى أَصْنامٍ لَهُمْ قالُوا يا
مُوسَى اجْعَلْ لَنا إِلهاً كَما لَهُمْ آلِهَةٌ قالَ إِنَّكُمْ قَوْمٌ تَجْهَلُونَ ﴿١٣٨﴾ إِنَّ هؤُلاءِ مُتَبَّرٌ
ما هُمْ فِيهِ وَ باطِلٌ ما كانُوا يَعْمَلُونَ ﴿١٣٩﴾ قالَ أَ غَيْرَ اللَّهِ أَبْغِيكُمْ إِلهاً وَ هُوَ
فَضَّلَكُمْ عَلَى الْعالَمِينَ ﴿١٤٠﴾ وَ إِذْ أَنْجَيْناكُمْ مِنْ آلِ فِرْعَوْنَ يَسُومُونَكُمْ سُوءَ
الْعَذابِ يُقَتِّلُونَ أَبْناءَكُمْ وَ يَسْتَحْيُونَ نِساءَكُمْ وَ فِي ذلِكُمْ بَلاءٌ مِنْ رَبِّكُمْ
عَظِيمٌ ﴿١٤١﴾ وَ واعَدْنا مُوسى ثَلاثِينَ لَيْلَةً وَ أَتْمَمْناها بِعَشْرٍ فَتَمَّ مِيقاتُ رَبِّهِ
أَرْبَعِينَ لَيْلَةً وَ قالَ مُوسى لِأَخِيهِ هارُونَ اخْلُفْنِي فِي قَوْمِي وَ أَصْلِحْ وَ لا تَتَّبِعْ
سَبِيلَ الْمُفْسِدِينَ ﴿١٤٢﴾ وَ لَمَّا جاءَ مُوسى لِمِيقاتِنا وَ كَلَّمَهُ رَبُّهُ قالَ رَبِّ أَرِنِي أَنْظُرْ
إِلَيْكَ قالَ لَنْ تَرانِي وَ لكِنِ انْظُرْ إِلَى الْجَبَلِ فَإِنِ اسْتَقَرَّ مَكانَهُ فَسَوْفَ تَرانِي
فَلَمَّا تَجَلَّى رَبُّهُ لِلْجَبَلِ جَعَلَهُ دَكًّا وَ خَرَّ مُوسى صَعِقاً فَلَمَّا أَفاقَ قالَ سُبْحانَكَ
تُبْتُ إِلَيْكَ وَ أَنَا أَوَّلُ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿١٤٣﴾ قالَ يا مُوسى إِنِّي اصْطَفَيْتُكَ عَلَى النَّاسِ
بِرِسالاتِي وَ بِكَلامِي فَخُذْ ما آتَيْتُكَ وَ كُنْ مِنَ الشَّاكِرِينَ ﴿١٤٤﴾ وَ كَتَبْنا لَهُ فِي
الْأَلْواحِ مِنْ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ مَوْعِظَةً وَ تَفْصِيلاً لِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ فَخُذْها بِقُوَّةٍ وَ أْمُرْ قَوْمَكَ
يَأْخُذُوا بِأَحْسَنِها سَأُرِيكُمْ دارَ الْفاسِقِينَ ﴿١٤٥﴾ سَأَصْرِفُ عَنْ آياتِيَ الَّذِينَ
يَتَكَبَّرُونَ فِي الْأَرْضِ بِغَيْرِ الْحَقِّ وَ إِنْ يَرَوْا كُلَّ آيَةٍ لا يُؤْمِنُوا بِها وَ إِنْ يَرَوْا سَبِيلَ
الرُّشْدِ لا يَتَّخِذُوهُ سَبِيلاً وَ إِنْ يَرَوْا سَبِيلَ الْغَيِّ يَتَّخِذُوهُ سَبِيلاً ذلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمْ
كَذَّبُوا بِآياتِنا وَ كانُوا عَنْها غافِلِينَ ﴿١٤٦﴾ وَ الَّذِينَ كَذَّبُوا بِآياتِنا وَ لِقاءِ الْآخِرَةِ

حَبِطَتْ أَعْمالُهُمْ هَلْ يُجْزَوْنَ إِلاَّ ما كانُوا يَعْمَلُونَ ﴿١٤٧﴾ وَ اتَّخَذَ قَوْمُ مُوسى مِنْ
بَعْدِهِ مِنْ حُلِيِّهِمْ عِجْلاً جَسَداً لَهُ خُوارٌ أَ لَمْ يَرَوْا أَنَّهُ لا يُكَلِّمُهُمْ وَ لا يَهْدِيهِمْ
سَبِيلاً اتَّخَذُوهُ وَ كانُوا ظالِمِينَ ﴿١٤٨﴾ وَ لَمَّا سُقِطَ فِي أَيْدِيهِمْ وَ رَأَوْا أَنَّهُمْ قَدْ ضَلُّوا
قالُوا لَئِنْ لَمْ يَرْحَمْنا رَبُّنا وَ يَغْفِرْ لَنا لَنَكُونَنَّ مِنَ الْخاسِرِينَ ﴿١٤٩﴾ وَ لَمَّا رَجَعَ مُوسى
إِلى قَوْمِهِ غَضْبانَ أَسِفاً قالَ بِئْسَما خَلَفْتُمُونِي مِنْ بَعْدِي أَ عَجِلْتُمْ أَمْرَ رَبِّكُمْ
وَ أَلْقَى الْأَلْواحَ وَ أَخَذَ بِرَأْسِ أَخِيهِ يَجُرُّهُ إِلَيْهِ قالَ ابْنَ أُمَّ إِنَّ الْقَوْمَ اسْتَضْعَفُونِي
وَ كادُوا يَقْتُلُونَنِي فَلا تُشْمِتْ بِيَ الْأَعْداءَ وَ لا تَجْعَلْنِي مَعَ الْقَوْمِ الظَّالِمِينَ ﴿١٥٠﴾
قالَ رَبِّ اغْفِرْ لِي وَ لِأَخِي وَ أَدْخِلْنا فِي رَحْمَتِكَ وَ أَنْتَ أَرْحَمُ الرَّاحِمِينَ ﴿١٥١﴾ إِنَّ
الَّذِينَ اتَّخَذُوا الْعِجْلَ سَيَنالُهُمْ غَضَبٌ مِنْ رَبِّهِمْ وَ ذِلَّةٌ فِي الْحَياةِ الدُّنْيا وَ كَذلِكَ
نَجْزِي الْمُفْتَرِينَ ﴿١٥٢﴾ وَ الَّذِينَ عَمِلُوا السَّيِّئاتِ ثُمَّ تابُوا مِنْ بَعْدِها وَ آمَنُوا إِنَّ
رَبَّكَ مِنْ بَعْدِها لَغَفُورٌ رَحِيمٌ ﴿١٥٣﴾ وَ لَمَّا سَكَتَ عَنْ مُوسَى الْغَضَبُ أَخَذَ الْأَلْواحَ
وَ فِي نُسْخَتِها هُدىً وَ رَحْمَةٌ لِلَّذِينَ هُمْ لِرَبِّهِمْ يَرْهَبُونَ ﴿١٥٤﴾

(7:138) *We carried the Children of Israel across the sea, whereat they came upon a people cleaving to certain idols that they had. They said, "O Moses, make for us a god like they have gods." He said, "You are indeed an ignorant lot.*

(7:139) *What they are [engaged] in is indeed bound to perish, and what they have been doing shall come to naught."*

(7:140) *He said, "Shall I find you a god other than Allah, while He has graced you over all the nations?"*

(7:141) *And when We delivered you from Pharaoh's clan who inflicted on you a terrible torment, slaughtering your sons and sparing your women, and there was a great test in that from your Lord.*

(7:142) *And We made an appointment with Moses for thirty nights, and completed them with ten [more]; thus the tryst of his Lord was completed in forty nights. And Moses said to Aaron, his brother,*

"Be my successor among my people, and set things right and do not follow the way of the agents of corruption."

(7:143) *When Moses arrived at Our tryst and his Lord spoke to him, he said, "My Lord, show [Yourself] to me, that I may look at You!" He said, "You shall never see Me. But look at the mountain: if it abides in its place, then you will see Me." So when his Lord disclosed Himself to the mountain, He crumbled it, and Moses fell down swooning. And when he recovered, he said, "Immaculate are You! I turn to You in penitence, and I am the first of the believers."*

(7:144) *He said, "O Moses, I have chosen you over the people with My messages and My speech. So take what I give you, and be among the grateful."*

(7:145) *And We wrote for him in the Tablets from all things some advice and some elaboration of all things, [and We said], "So hold on to them with power, and bid your people to hold on to the best of [what is in] them. Soon I shall show you the abode of the transgressors.*

(7:146) *Soon I shall turn away from My signs those who are unjustly proud in the earth, and [even] though they should see every sign, they will not believe in it, and if they see the way of rectitude they will not take it as [their] way, and if they see the way of error they will take it as [their] way. That is because they deny Our signs and are oblivious to them."*

(7:147) *Those who deny Our signs and the encounter of the Hereafter, their works have failed. Shall they be requited except for what they used to do?*

(7:148) *The people of Moses took up in his absence a calf [cast] from their ornaments—a body that gave out a lowing sound. Did they not regard that it did not speak to them, nor did it guide them to any way? They took it up [for worship] and they were wrongdoers.*

(7:149) *But when they became remorseful and realized they had gone astray, they said, "Should our Lord have no mercy on us, and forgive us, we will be surely among the losers."*

(7:150) *And when Moses returned to his people, angry and indignant, he said, "Evil have you substituted me in my absence! Did you lose*

patience with your Lord's decree?" He threw down the Tablets and seized his brother by the head, pulling him towards himself. He said, "Son of my mother, indeed this people thought me to be weak, and they were about to kill me. So do not let the enemies gloat over me, and do not take me with the wrongdoing lot."

(7:151) *He said, "My Lord, forgive me and my brother, and admit us into Your mercy, for You are the most merciful of the merciful.*

(7:152) *Indeed those who took up the calf [for worship] shall be overtaken by their Lord's wrath and abasement in the life of the world." Thus do We requite the fabricators [of lies].*

(7:153) *Yet [to] those who commit misdeeds but repent after that and believe—indeed, after that, your Lord shall surely be All-Forgiving, Ever-Merciful.*

(7:154) *And when Moses' indignation abated, he picked up the Tablets whose inscriptions contained guidance and mercy for those who are in awe of their Lord.*

Introduction

These verses discuss the stories of the Children of Israel after they were delivered from their bondage under Pharaoh's clan. The verses pursue the overall theme of the chapter up to here, which is the idea that whenever the religious call was made to a nation, they were to be found closer to disbelief than belief, and the majority of them broke God's covenant. Hence, God would bless the believers with His special grace, and would penalize the disbelievers with His excruciating punishment.

These verses cover the following parts of their story:

(1) The Children of Israel were given passage across the sea.
(2) They asked Moses to make an idol for them to worship.
(3) They worshiped the calf when Moses had gone to the tryst of his Lord.
(4) The Torah was revealed to Moses.

Commentary

وَجَاوَزْنَا بِبَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ الْبَحْرَ فَأَتَوْا عَلَىٰ قَوْمٍ يَعْكُفُونَ عَلَىٰ أَصْنَامٍ لَهُمْ ۚ قَالُوا يَا مُوسَى اجْعَلْ لَنَا إِلَٰهًا كَمَا لَهُمْ آلِهَةٌ ۚ قَالَ إِنَّكُمْ قَوْمٌ تَجْهَلُونَ ﴿١٣٨﴾

(7:138) ***We carried the Children of Israel across the sea, whereat they came upon a people cleaving* (yaʿkufūna, from ʿukūf) *to certain idols that they had. They said, "O Moses, make for us a god like they have gods." He said, "You are indeed an ignorant lot."***

According to *al-Mufradāt* of al-Rāghib, *ʿukūf* is "to turn to something and adhere to it out of reverence."

… make for us a god like they have gods…: The implied meaning of this comparison is: "Make for us a god like they have gods *made for them*" [where the last part is omitted].

The Children of Israel followed the religion of their ancestor Abraham. Some of their previous prophets were Isaac, Jacob and Joseph, all of whom propagated monotheism. Their religion subscribed to God as the sole deity to be worshiped, and believed Him to be transcendent, incorporeal, and free from having physical properties like shape and size. Nevertheless, the Israelites had materialistic and empiricist inclinations, and lived on the basis of sense perceptions, as we can infer from their stories. They did not pay any attention to what lies beyond sensory perceptions, except for some formalities, but not as a genuine or authentic belief. Moreover, they lived for several years under the rule of Egyptians who were idol-worshipers. That impressed itself on their souls, even though their racial pride maintained their ancestral religion for them to some extent.

Most of them viewed God as a physical being among other physical beings. That was their impression of God. We can even observe this in the extant Torah today, which presents us with a very anthropomorphic view of the divine essence. Whenever Moses tried to describe the transcendent nature of the Truth to them in a way that their minds could grasp, they would divert it to shapes and figures that were fabrications of their imagination. For this reason, when they saw in their way a community that subscribed to their idols, they desired to have the like of that for themselves. They asked Moses to make for them a god, just like the gods that they have and adhere to.

Moses found no alternative to describing God's oneness to them other than lowering the discussion to the level of their limited understanding. First he blamed them for their ignorance about the status of their Lord, for it should have been clear to them that the way of the idol-worshipers is wrong and fruitless. Second, he "defined" God for them through describing His attributes. This is how he clarified that their Lord cannot

be represented by an idol or defined by an image. We shall see this below.

إِنَّ هَٰؤُلَاءِ مُتَبَّرٌ مَا هُمْ فِيهِ وَبَاطِلٌ مَا كَانُوا يَعْمَلُونَ ﴿١٣٩﴾

(7:139) "***What they are [engaged] in is indeed bound to perish* (mutabbar)*, and what they have been doing shall come to naught.***"

Mutabbar is derived from *tabār*, which means *halāk* (destruction, death, perishing). The verse literally says, "What they are in," which means the path and tradition that they pursue, which was idol-worship. *What they have been doing* refers to their ritual practices. The meaning is: The path of these idol-worshipers is doomed to damnation, and their religious deeds are void. Therefore, it is not befitting of an intelligent person to incline toward it. Instead, one should serve God, which leads one to eternal happiness and permanent good.

قَالَ أَغَيْرَ اللَّهِ أَبْغِيكُمْ إِلَٰهًا وَهُوَ فَضَّلَكُمْ عَلَى الْعَالَمِينَ ﴿١٤٠﴾

(7:140) ***He said, "Shall I find you* (abghīkum)*** ***a god other than Allah, while He has graced you over all the nations?"***

Abghīkum means "to seek, to procure." Here Moses introduces and describes their Lord to them.

… Shall I find you a god other than Allah…: What he means is: "Any god that I might make or assign for you would be other than Allah, but the One that you must worship is Allah, for He is your Lord." Moses effectively refers to God's Lordship by describing Him as: *He has graced you over all the nations*. Their conversation can be reconstructed and elaborated as follows:

> The Israelites: *Make for us a god like they have gods* (7:138).
>
> Moses: How can I procure for you a manufactured lord, for that would be other than your real Lord: Allah. The worship of any other lord would be void and doomed to perish.
>
> The Israelites: How can we worship Him when we do not see Him, and have no way of seeing Him? (This is one of the principal arguments of idol-worshipers.)
>
> Moses: Worship Him based on what you know of His attributes. He is the One Who has preferred you over all nations through His manifest signs, His true religion, and His deliverance of you from Pharaoh and his misdeeds.

As we can see, this verse presents a lofty truth to weak intellects through subtle expressions and concise arguments.

وَإِذْ أَنْجَيْنَاكُمْ مِنْ آلِ فِرْعَوْنَ يَسُومُونَكُمْ سُوءَ الْعَذَابِ ۖ يُقَتِّلُونَ أَبْنَاءَكُمْ وَيَسْتَحْيُونَ نِسَاءَكُمْ ۚ وَفِي ذَٰلِكُمْ بَلَاءٌ مِنْ رَبِّكُمْ عَظِيمٌ ﴿١٤١﴾

(7:141) ***And when We delivered you from Pharaoh's clan who inflicted on you* (yasūmūnakum)** ***a terrible torment, slaughtering* (yuqattilūna, from taqtīl)** ***your sons and sparing* (yastaḥyūna, from istiḥyā')** ***your women, and there was a great test in that* (dhālikum)** ***from your Lord.***

The verb *sāma yasūmu* means "imposing something on someone in a humiliating and disgraceful way." *Taqtīl* means "killing abundantly."[1] We saw the word *istiḥyā'* before [in verse 7:127]. It means sparing their women and letting them live in order to serve them as maids. The demonstrative pronoun *dhālikum* (that) apparently refers to the above mentioned tortures of Pharaoh's clan against the Children of Israel.

Some exegetes have suggested that the verse is addressed to the Jews who were living at the time of the revelation of the Qur'an. God reminds them of the great favor that He showed their forefathers at the time of Pharaoh. However, it is more consistent with the context and flow of the verses to say that the verse is addressed to the very companions of Moses who lived at his time. It is addressed to them as an expression of surprise, for they so quickly forgot God's great blessing upon them, whereby He rescued them from such a dreadful calamity. We shall see another similar expression of surprise—albeit in the third person—below, where God says: *Did they not regard that it did not speak to them, nor did it guide them to any way?* (7:148).

وَوَاعَدْنَا مُوسَىٰ ثَلَاثِينَ لَيْلَةً وَأَتْمَمْنَاهَا بِعَشْرٍ فَتَمَّ مِيقَاتُ رَبِّهِ أَرْبَعِينَ لَيْلَةً ۚ وَقَالَ مُوسَىٰ لِأَخِيهِ هَارُونَ اخْلُفْنِي فِي قَوْمِي وَأَصْلِحْ وَلَا تَتَّبِعْ سَبِيلَ الْمُفْسِدِينَ ﴿١٤٢﴾

(7:142) ***And We made an appointment with Moses for thirty nights,***

1 In other words, the verbal pattern *taf'īl* in this case implies abundance and multitude. (Trans.)

and completed them with ten [more]; thus the tryst* (mīqāt) *of his Lord was completed in forty nights. And Moses said to Aaron, his brother, "Be my successor among my people, and set things right and do not follow the way of the agents of corruption."

Mīqāt is close in meaning to *waqt* (time). *Majmaʿ al-bayān* says:

The difference between *mīqāt* and *waqt* is that *mīqāt* is a specific time that is assigned for some activity, but *waqt* is the general time and duration of something. That is why the word *mīqāt* is used for the hajj. *Mawāqīt al-ḥajj* [extracted from verse 2:189] are the places that are assigned for the pilgrims to enter the state of *iḥrām*.

The verse describes God's appointment with Moses in two stages: it was initially set for thirty nights, then that was extended by another ten nights. The verse then concludes that they added up to forty. Elsewhere we read: *And when We made an appointment with Moses for forty nights* (2:51), where the verse only refers to the subtotal of both appointments. In other words, the verse in Sūrah al-Baqarah [2:51] states that the entire forty nights were appointed, and the verse in Sūrah al-Aʿrāf [7:142] clarifies that the total mentioned in the other verse consisted of two appointments.

The meaning is: God gave Moses an appointment of thirty nights to draw him near to Himself and speak to him. Then He gave him another appointment of ten nights as a complement to the initial appointment. Thus the tryst of his Lord was completed in forty nights.

The verse mentions "nights" instead of "days" even though Moses also spent the days of that period on Mount Ṭūr. Besides, it is more common to use days when referring to the appointed times of activities. In this case, however, night is more pertinent, because the tryst was to draw closer to God, indulge in His remembrance, and engage in private conversation with Him. The night is more suitable for this purpose because that is when the senses are less distracted, and the soul is more prepared for intimacy. One of the blessings of this nocturnal tryst was the revelation of the Torah. The same idea can be found in these verses: *O you wrapped up in your mantle! Stand vigil through the night, except a little… Indeed soon We shall cast on you a weighty word. Indeed the watch of the night is firmer in tread and more upright in respect to speech, for indeed during the day you have drawn-out engagements* (73:1-7).

… And Moses said to Aaron, his brother, "Be my successor among my people…": Moses said this when he was departing them for his tryst. We

can infer this from the phrase, *Be my successor among my people*, because succession only makes sense in the absence of the original person.

The Children of Israel are called *my people* and *his people* in several places in this chapter. Their ascription to Moses is in harmony with the other similar stories in this chapter, where Prophets Noah, Hūd, Ṣāliḥ and others called their people: *O my people*.[1] Otherwise, they are referred to as *the Children of Israel* in Sūrah Ṭā-Hā.

… and set things right and do not follow the way of the agents of corruption": Moses commanded his brother to set things right, and to not follow the path of those who make mischief. Aaron was a divine prophet and an infallible messenger. He would never sin, nor follow the chiefs of corruption in religious matters. Moses knew his this better than anyone. Therefore, what is meant here cannot be a prohibition against religious disbelief and disobedience. Instead, it pertains to governmental and managerial affairs. Moses advised his brother to not follow the counsel and approval of the corrupt individuals among his people throughout the term of his succession, when Moses is absent. We can infer this from the phrase, *and set things right*, which shows that the next part of his advice—*and do not follow the way of the agents of corruption*—is about conducting their social affairs properly. He should not govern them according to the way of the agents of corruption. He should not make decisions based on what they advise him as the appropriate thing to do.

This statement shows that there were a group of rebels and trouble-makers among Moses' people who used to cause mischief, sabotage his plans, and anticipate calamities to betide him. That is why Moses warned his brother against following their way, lest they may disturb his affairs, and conjure plots against him. While Moses had suffered all those troubles and tribulations to establish order and unity among them, these people wanted to disunite the Children of Israel and throw them into disarray.

وَلَمَّا جَاءَ مُوسَىٰ لِمِيقَاتِنَا وَكَلَّمَهُ رَبُّهُ قَالَ رَبِّ أَرِنِي أَنْظُرْ إِلَيْكَ ۚ قَالَ لَنْ تَرَانِي
وَلَٰكِنِ انْظُرْ إِلَى الْجَبَلِ فَإِنِ اسْتَقَرَّ مَكَانَهُ فَسَوْفَ تَرَانِي ۚ فَلَمَّا تَجَلَّىٰ رَبُّهُ لِلْجَبَلِ
جَعَلَهُ دَكًّا وَخَرَّ مُوسَىٰ صَعِقًا ۚ فَلَمَّا أَفَاقَ قَالَ سُبْحَانَكَ تُبْتُ إِلَيْكَ وَأَنَا أَوَّلُ

1 See verses 59, 61, 65, 67, 73, 79, 85, 93, and the author's exposition of them in volume 15 of the English translation. (Trans.)

الْمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿١٤٣﴾

(7:143) ***When Moses arrived at Our tryst and his Lord spoke to him, he said, "My Lord, show [Yourself] to me, that I may look at You!" He said, "You shall never see Me. But look at the mountain: if it abides in its place, then you will see Me." So when his Lord disclosed*** **(tajallá, from tajallī)** ***Himself to the mountain, He crumbled it*** **(dakkan)**, ***and Moses fell down*** **(kharra, from khurūr)** ***swooning*** **(ṣaʿiqan, from ṣaʿqah).** ***And when he recovered*** **(afāqa, from ifāqah)**, ***he said, "Immaculate are You! I turn to You in penitence, and I am the first of the believers."***

Tajallī (manifestation, epiphany) is "to take on *jalāʾ* (appearance, expression, disclosure)." *Dakk* means "pounding something, hitting something hard." What is meant by *dakk* (pounding, crushing) in this verse is *madkūk* (pounded, crushed, levelled).[1] *Khurūr* means "to fall, to collapse." There are two meanings for *ṣaʿqah*: (1) dying; (2) fainting, losing consciousness and sensory perception. *Ifāqah* means regaining consciousness and sensory perception. After fainting, when the person recovers their state of sound consciousness and balanced intelligence, it is said that "the person *afāqa* from their swoon." Based on its apparent structure, the verse can be interpreted as follows:

When Moses arrived at Our tryst…: That was the tryst that We appointed for him.

… and his Lord spoke to him…: God spoke His words to Moses.

… he said…: Moses said.

… "My Lord, show [Yourself] to me **(arinī)**, ***that I may look at You*** **(anẓur ilayka)***"…:*** Moses asked God to show Himself to him, so that he may look at Him. There are three stages here in sequence:

(1) First one must be given the ability, the means and the establishments (called *tamkīn* or *tamakkun*) to look at something.
(2) Then one can look at it (called *naẓar*) in order to see it.
(3) Then one would see it (called *ruʾyah*).[2]

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1 In other words, the *maṣdar* (gerund, verbal noun) here implies the meaning of *mafʿūl* (passive participial noun, accusative case). (Trans.)

2 The first stage is what is meant by: *arinī* (show to me). The second stage is indicated by *anẓur ilayka* (that I may look at You). The last stage is not explicitly mentioned in the verse, as it is implied by the rest of the verse,

Therefore, what he meant was: Enable me to look at you (*anẓuru ilayka*), so that by looking at you I may see you (*arāka*).[1]

… He said…: God said to Moses.

… "You shall never* (lan) *see Me…": The negational particle *lan* here implies "never."

… But look at the mountain* (al-jabal)*…: The definite article *al-* in *al-jabal* ("the" in *the mountain*) shows that there was a mountain right there before Moses.

… if it abides in its place, then you will see Me"…: You can not bear to see Me. Instead, look at the mountain. I will manifest Myself to it; if it stays where it is and can endure My vision, then you would know that you too are capable of looking at Me and seeing Me.

… So when his Lord disclosed Himself…: When God manifested.

… to the mountain, He crumbled it…: Through His appearance and manifestation, God demolished the mountain into small pieces and particles in the air, or crumpled it onto the ground.

… and Moses fell down swooning…: He fell down dead or unconscious, being shocked by that scene.

… And when he recovered, he said, "Immaculate are You! I turn to You in penitence…": I repent to You of my request.

… and I am the first of the believers": I am the first to believe that You cannot be seen.

The above is the most apparent meaning of the text. Yet, there is room for further contemplation.

What is Meant by Seeing

What the common mind would understand from this verse is that it pertains to physical vision through looking with the eyes. It stands to reason—and we shall have no doubt—that physical vision requires a set of physical processes which create an image of the object that is being observed in the visual faculty of the observer. That is how the image would

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especially by the statement: *lan tarānī* (You shall never see Me). (Trans.)

1 The author's point here is to distinguish between *naẓar* and *ruʾyah*. *Naẓar* is the stage when one turns one's look toward something and searches for it. *Ruʾyah* is when one's eyes actually sight the thing. Therefore, *ruʾyah* (seeing) is subsequent to *naẓar* (looking). (Trans.)

represent the same shape and color as the object. In short, what we know for sure is that physical vision is realized when there is some physical matter in both the object and the subject.

The Qur'an, however, teaches us very expressly that there is no like or similar for the Almighty God in any aspect whatsoever. God is neither physical, nor has physical properties.[1] He is not encompassed by time and space. He is not to be found in any physical direction. There cannot exist any image—whether mentally or externally—that may represent and resemble Him in any way whatsoever. All these are definite Qur'anic principles.

Clearly, such a Being cannot be an object of physical vision, in the way that we see other things. Nor can there be any mental image—whether in this world or in the hereafter—which may correspond to Him and reflect Him. Besides, Moses was a great prophet. He was one of the five Resolute Messengers (*ūlū al-ʿazm*) who are the chiefs of all prophets. Given his lofty position and grand status, he could not have been ignorant of this.

Nor would he entertain the wish that God may empower his eyes to see and observe Him, because we are talking about a Being that is transcendent from motion, direction, space and time. God is free from the defilement[2] of physical matter and its properties. Otherwise, such a desire from Moses would be a frivolous hope, not a serious request.

It is also meaningless to bring up God's infinite power to justify a physical interpretation. Our visual faculty is a physical property in its essence and nature, which makes it impossible for it to observe a reality

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1 "Being physical" and "having physical properties" refer to two planes of existence. Being physical means having a material body with spatiotemporal dimensions, which applies to all beings in the world of nature. Beyond the realm of nature is the imaginal world (*ʿālam al-mithāl*), where beings do not have a material essence and substance, but they have physical properties. For instance, geometrical shapes do not exist in time and space, but they have shape and form. The author's point in these discussions is that in order for something to be perceived with the physical eye, it must belong to either of these two realms. If a being is absolutely transcendent, immaterial, and free from all physical properties, then it cannot be an object of eyesight. (Trans.)

2 In metaphysical discussions, words like "defilement" mean existential limitation, and should not be mixed with value judgments, which are fundamentally foreign to metaphysical discourses. (Trans.)

that has absolutely no trace of physical matter and physical properties. No matter how much God strengthens a physical instrument, as long as it is physical in nature, it cannot be applied to something that is beyond matter and material properties. A physical device can only observe something of limited size and boundary.

Given the above points, the vision of God that Moses desired was not physical vision. And as a corollary to this, God's negative answer was also about a non-physical vision.[1] Otherwise, a physical vision of God is out of the question *ipso facto*. It was neither something to be requested [by a prophet like Moses], nor something to be rejected [in such a context].

There are indeed other verses in the Qur'an which affirm the vision of God and other similar concepts: *Some faces will be fresh on that day, looking toward their Lord* (75:22-23); *The heart did not deny what it saw* (53:11); *Whoever expects to encounter Allah [should know that] Allah's [appointed] time will indeed come* (29:5); *Is it not sufficient that your Lord is witness to all things? Look! They are indeed in doubt about the encounter with their Lord! Look! He indeed encompasses all things!* (41:53-54); *So whoever expects to encounter his Lord—let him act righteously, and not associate anyone with the worship of his Lord* (18:110). There are many other verses which can be added to this list. Yet, there are also some verses which deny the vision of God, such as: *The sights do not apprehend Him, yet He apprehends the sights* (6:103). The current verse is another example of this: *He said, "You shall never see Me"* (7:143).

So what is intended by verses which affirm the vision of God? According to some scholars, what is meant by *ruʾyah* (seeing, vision) is decisive knowledge.[2] It is called *ruʾyah* to emphasize and/or exaggerate the clarity and evidence of that knowledge.

It is true that *ruʾyah* is a form of decisive knowledge in the Qur'an, but that is not sufficient. We need to dig deeper to find the reality of this decisive knowledge. Not every sure piece of information is called *ruʾyah* (seeing, vision) or other similar concepts like *liqāʾ* (meeting, encounter). For

1 In other words, God rejected the same type of vision which Moses demanded. (Trans.)

2 "Decisive" here is a translation of *ḍarūrī* (necessary, essential, certain). It means a kind of knowledge that is sure to be true, without even the possibility of a doubt. The author's examples below help clarify this. (Trans.)

instance, we know for sure that there used to be someone called Prophet Abraham, someone called Alexander, and someone called Caesar in the past, even though we have not seen them. We also have decisive knowledge that London, Chicago and Moscow exist, even though we may not have been there. Yet, we do not use "seeing" to describe our knowledge in these cases, even if we were to emphasize and exaggerate. One may say, "I know about the existence of Abraham, Alexander and the Caesar *as though* I have seen them" but one would not literally say, "I *have seen* them." Similarly, one who has not been to these cities may describe their knowledge of the cities by saying, "I *know* that London, Chicago and Moscow exist" but one would not say, "I have *seen* them [before]" or "I *see* them [now]."

A more patent form of decisive knowledge is our knowledge about self-evident truths, such as: "One is half of two"; "Four is even"; "A relation hinges on two sides." These are not material or sensory observations because they are universal statements. They are decisive and necessarily true, but we refer to them as things that we *know*, not things that we *see*. It is semantically incorrect to use *ruʾyah* for such decisive knowledge. This should be clear.

The same can be said about all kinds of acquired knowledge, such as all thoughts and statements that we understand, and all concepts and meanings that we imagine. We call them knowledge, but we do not call them *ruʾyah*. We say, "I know this," but we do not say, "I see this." In such cases, we might use the word "view" (*raʾy*) in the sense of judgment and position, but not in the sense of observation and experience.

Yet, there remain some forms of knowledge for which we use the term *ruʾyah* (seeing, vision) without any reservation. Some examples are: "I see that I am myself"; "I see that I want this"; "I see that I don't want this"; "I see that I like…"; "I see that I hate…"; "I see that I hop…"; "I see that I desire…" In these statements, what is meant is that I find and feel myself directly, without being veiled by anything. I observe in the innermost essence of myself a sense of desire, resentment, love, hate, hope, ambition and so on. It is neither a sensory nor an intellectual observation, but a feeling that I find within myself.

This should not be mixed with similar statements about *others*, such as: "I see that you like this" or "I see that you don't like this." In these cases, what is meant is: "I saw you in a certain condition, behaving in a certain

way. From that, I deduced that you must like or dislike such-and-such." This is categorically different from observing one's own desire, resentment, like and dislike. One finds these things within oneself without any barrier, and without the intermediation of argumentation or deliberation. In the case of others, however, one arrives at the given conclusion through mental inference and deduction.

It is common to use *ruʾyah* for one's personal experience of one's inner conditions. This is a type of knowledge where the knower observes the very external reality of the known [that is, the object of knowledge].[1] This includes one's knowledge about oneself, one's inner faculties, one's personal traits, and one's psychological conditions. The realization of this kind of knowledge does not depend on any physical condition such as direction, time or place. The reader must reflect on this very carefully.

This sense of observation (*ruʾyah*) is indeed what is meant in the Qur'anic verses which affirm divine vision. There are some indications and evidence in these verses which clarify this meaning for us. Some examples are:

(1) *Is it not sufficient that your Lord is witness* (shahīd) *to all things? Look! They are indeed in doubt about the encounter with their Lord! Look! He indeed encompasses all things!* (41:53-54). The first verse states that God is present with everything, where He is either the witness or witnessed.[2] The second verse states that He encompasses all things. These two qualities—of being a witness over all things and encompassing them all—apply to God not in a physical sense. His presence is not restricted to any particular direction, place or object. Therefore, if He were to be found and observed, He would be found both outside and inside, encompassing not only the person, but also the person's cognition, observation and experience. The same applies to *the encounter with their Lord* [mentioned between the two qualities of witnessing and encompassing all things]. What is meant is not a physical encounter, which occurs only when two

1 This is called presential and immediate knowledge (*al-ʿilm al-ḥuḍūrī*). In the other forms of knowledge, called acquired knowledge (*al-ʿilm al-ḥuṣūlī*), the known is not directly present with the knower, but is available through a mental image of it that corresponds to its external reality. (Trans.)

2 This depends on how the word *shahīd* is interpreted in the verse. In the Qur'an, it always means "witness" as a subject, not "witnessed" as an object. (Trans.)

objects are physically aligned with one another in the same time and place.

(2) *The heart did not deny what it saw* (53:11). In this verse, "seeing" is ascribed to the heart, which is undoubtedly the rational human soul,[1] not the piece of flesh that is on the middle-left side of the chest.

(3) *When Our signs are recited to him, he says, "Myths of the ancients!" No indeed! Rather, their hearts have been sullied by what they have been earning* (83:14-15). According to these verses, what veils one from God is the rust of disobedience, which one acquires through sins. This defilement obstructs one's heart—meaning one's soul and self—from one's Lord. Hence, they lose the privilege of observing the divine. This means that if they were to see God, it would have been through their hearts—that is, their soul and self—not through their physical eye.

(4) *No indeed! Were you to know with knowledge of certainty, you would surely see hell. Again, you will surely see it with the eye of certainty* (102:5-7). These verses also affirm some form of seeing that is different from physical sight.

(5) *Thus did We show Abraham the kingdom* (malakūt) *of the heavens and the earth, that he might be of those who possess certitude* (6:75). We discussed this verse previously, and explained that *malakūt* means the inner orientation of things, as opposed to their visible aspect.[2]

The above discussion should clarify that there are two types of vision in the Qur'an: (1) sensory vision through the physical eyes; (2) an inner consciousness of oneself without the involvement of sensory or mental instruments. We humans have a certain *shuʿūr* (consciousness, cognizance, sense, feeling) of our Lord other than our acquired belief through thinking, argumentation and evidence. Our divine consciousness is a direct experience. It is not veiled by anything. Nor can anything make us distracted and heedless of it, except for our occupation with ourselves and the sins we commit. But even so, that would still be a form of *ghaflah* (heedlessness, inadvertence, distraction), which is different from ignorance. It means that one is inadvertent of some reality that is present

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1 This is based on the Qur'an's usage of the term in numerous places. (Trans.)

2 See volume 13 (1st ed.), pp. 217ff of the English translation. Also, see verses 7:172-174 below, just before the section titled "Back to the Verse," as well as volume 1 (1st ed.), p. 191, under verse 2:29, and volume 2 (1st ed.), pp. 80-81, under verse 2:124. (Trans.)

nonetheless, not that the knowledge is lost altogether. The Qur'an talks about heedlessness, which is when one mode of knowledge [of the divine] vanishes in the shadow of another mode of knowledge [of engagement with multiplicities]. Otherwise, there is no verse in the Qur'an to hint at a complete loss of this knowledge.[1]

What we said above is based on the Qur'an, and is also supported by robust rational arguments. The narrations from the Imams of Ahl al-Bayt also confirm this, as we shall see in our examination of the narrations, by God's will.

We can also infer from the Qur'an that this type of knowledge of God—which can be called *ruʾyah*—will become complete for His righteous servants on the Day of Resurrection, as the Qur'an says: *Some faces will be fresh on that day, looking toward their Lord* (75:22-23). This means that the place for such vision is the hereafter, not this world. In this world, our souls are engaged with the management of our bodies, and we are engrossed in our physical needs. Nonetheless, we are travelers on the path of meeting the divine and achieving decisive knowledge about the signs of our Lord. In this world, we are still on the path, where we are constantly laboring hard toward the meeting of our Lord, but the meeting is not realized until we actually encounter Him [in the hereafter]. God says: *O human being! You are laboring toward your Lord laboriously, and you will encounter Him* (84:6). There are many other verses in the Qur'an in this regard, saying that the Almighty God is the end, goal, final destination and returning point of all beings.

This is the special type of decisive knowledge that God has affirmed for Himself in the Qur'an, and has called it *ruʾyah* (seeing, vision) and *liqāʾ* (meeting, encounter). Whether these terms are used literally or figuratively is not our concern. As we explained above, the circumstantial evidence

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1 The discussion here is closely related to the author's discussion on verses 7:172-174 below. However, there is an important distinction to be made. The primordial covenant mentioned in verse 7:172 is about our *basic* intuition and *initial* vision of the divine, while the current verse is about its *ultimate perfection*. That is why verses 7:172-174 are applicable to all human beings, while the current verse is particularly about a great prophet like Moses. The similarity is that both of them refer to the same type of knowledge, which is an inner experience of the divine through our pristine nature and original intuition (*fiṭrah*). (Trans.)

(sing. *qarīnah*) in the verses shows that what is meant by "seeing" is this type of knowledge [not physical sight]. Now, if the term is used literally, then the evidence would be determining evidence. If the term is used figuratively, then the evidence would be averting evidence.[1] The Holy Qur'an is the first book to unveil this reality in such a novel way. The previous scriptures that we have at hand are silent about such knowledge of God. Similarly, we do not find any discussion of such topics in the works of the ancient philosophers that have reached us. True, they talked about presential and immediate knowledge (*al-ʿilm al-ḥuḍūrī*), but to them, this type of knowledge exclusively pertained to one's knowledge of oneself. Extending its application to knowledge of God is something that came with the advent of Islam. Therefore, we must be grateful to the Qur'an for elucidating divine teachings for us.

Back to the Verse:

When Moses arrived at Our tryst and his Lord spoke to him, he said, "My Lord, show [Yourself] to me, that I may look at You!"…: Moses requested to "see" God, which, as we explained, means a special kind of decisive knowledge about the divine. This request was subsequent to several stages of divine knowledge which God bestowed upon him. God first gave Moses knowledge of Himself through reflecting on His signs. Then He advanced Moses' knowledge by choosing him as His messenger and speaking to him, which is a form of knowing God through hearing. At that stage, Moses hoped that he could also realize knowledge through seeing, which is the highest stage of decisive knowledge of God. After all, God is the best One to be hoped and trusted.

This is what he requested, not "seeing" in the sense of physical sight with the eyes. A noble prophet like Moses would be far from not knowing that such vision of God is impossible.

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1 An averting evidence (*qarīnah ṣārifah*) indicates that a term is used figuratively, not literally. A determining evidence (*qarīnah muʿayyanah*) indicates which homonym is meant—not figuratively, but literally. The question here is whether the literal meaning of "seeing" is restricted to eyesight, or it also includes inner insight. In the first case, the surrounding evidence (*qarāʾin*) in the verses would be averting, indicating that "seeing" is used in its *figurative* meaning of inner insight, as opposed to its literal meaning of eyesight. In the second case, the evidence would be determining, showing that the second *literal* meaning of the term is intended. (Trans.)

… He said, "You shall never see Me…": This is an everlasting negation. However, God affirms the realization of divine vision—in the sense of decisive knowledge—in the hereafter [in other verses]. Therefore, the negation in this verse pertains to worldly life. As long as one is busy with managing the body and taking care of various needs to survive, one will not realize a state of total severance from everything but God. That will only occur when one is cut off from all things, including one's body and its properties, which amounts to death.

The meaning is: You are never capable of seeing me—in the sense of decisive knowledge—in this world until you encounter Me [after death]. At that point, you will know Me with the kind of decisive knowledge that you desire.

… You shall never* (lan) *see Me…: The apparent meaning of the negational particle *lan* is "never," which indicates everlasting negation. This, however, need not extend to the hereafter. The decisive knowledge being negated here could be realized at that point, and this does not contradict the usage of *lan* (never) in the verse, because as long as something does not occur for the duration of this world, it is sufficient for the usage of *lan*. Some other Qur'anic examples of using *lan* for everlasting negation only in this world are: *Indeed you will never* (lan) *pierce the earth, nor ever* (lan) *reach the mountains in height* (17:37); *Indeed you can never* (lan) *have patience with me!* (18:67).

Even if one insists that the apparent meaning of *lan* in this verse is total negation in both this world and the hereafter, we could draw on the verse: *Never* (lan) *will the Jews be pleased with you, nor the Christians, until* (ḥattá) *you followed their creed* (2:120). Here, the apparently everlasting negation *lan* (never) is qualified with *ḥattá* (until, unless), which indicates the possibility of an end to it.[1] Therefore, we could say that other verses which affirm the vision of God in the hereafter—like *Some faces will be fresh on that day, looking toward their Lord* (75:22-23)—would similarly qualify the apparent everlasting negation in the current verse.

… You shall never see Me…: The negation here pertains to Moses' capability and endurance. This interpretation can be confirmed by the next part of the verse: *But look at the mountain: if it abides in its place,*

1 For further Qur'anic examples of a "qualified never" see verses 2:55, 3:92, 5:22, 6:124, 12:66, 17:90, 17:93, 20:91. (Trans.)

then you will see Me. God revealing Himself to Moses is compared to His manifesting Himself to the mountain. The meaning is: My appearance and manifestation to the mountain is similar to My appearance to you. So if this great mountain, with its high degree of endurance, can stay as it is in its place, then you too can hope to endure the appearance and manifestation of your Lord.

… But look at the mountain: if it abides in its place, then you will see Me…: This statement does not prove that divine manifestation is impossible. How could it be impossible when God indeed manifested to the mountain? Rather it is meant to show and teach Moses that he is incapable of bearing the divine manifestation. If God were to manifest to him, Moses would not abide in its place, which means he would cease to exist, just as it happened to the mountain as it crumbled.

… So when his Lord disclosed Himself to the mountain, He crumbled it…: As we said, this statement shows that divine manifestation is possible. The mountain was crushed and transformed into tiny dust particles, which means that it lost its identity as a mountain. God's manifestation gave an end to the mountain's term [of existing as a mountain].

… and Moses fell down swooning…: The context shows that Moses fell down swooning because of the shock and terror of observing that scene. Here we must remind ourselves that Moses was the one who throw the staff, whereby it turned into a manifest python, and swallowed thousands of pythons and snakes. He was the one who split the sea, and drowned thousands and thousands of Pharaoh's clan in a single moment. He was the one who raised the mountain above the heads of the Israelites as though it were a cloud. He was the one who performed many other miracles. These things were more shocking and extensive than the collapse of the mountain, but he was not terrified by any of them. The crumbling of the mountain was lesser than those events. Moreover, he was apparently immune from any harm, because God crushed the mountain in order to show him something.

We can thus infer that what made him faint was a realization that occurred to him with respect to his request, and the absolute dominance of God which he came so close to witness. Of course, he did not witness it himself, but the mountain did, and that resulted in its total destruction, whereby it could not stay in its place even for the blink of an eye. This interpretation [of the cause of his swooning] can be confirmed by his

repentance after his recovery, as we shall see presently.

***… And when he recovered, he said, "Immaculate are You! I turn to You in penitence* (tubtu, from tawbah)…":** Moses repented and turned to God in penitence because he realized that his request was out of place. God embraced him in His grace to show him that his request is impossible [in this world]. He taught him this lesson experientially through the destruction of the mountain as He manifested to it.

Moses first glorified God and proclaimed His sanctity with respect to his previous notion that it is possible to see God [in this world]. Then he stated his repentance of what he had done, indicating his hope that God would also return to him [with mercy and forgiveness]. The applicability of *tawbah* (repentance, penitence) is not restricted to cases of some sin or disobedience. Rather, it means returning to God after any sense of distance in any way. We discussed this in volume 4 of this book.[1]

… and I am the first of the believers": Given the context, what is meant is: "I am the first one among my people to believe that You cannot be seen." Another possible meaning is: "I am the first believer among my people because of Your guidance and blessing. I believed in You before they did. Therefore, it befits me to repent to you of any intentional or unintentional shortcoming." However, this meaning is unlikely [given the verse's context].

قَالَ يَا مُوسَىٰ إِنِّي اصْطَفَيْتُكَ عَلَى النَّاسِ بِرِسَالَاتِي وَبِكَلَامِي فَخُذْ مَا آتَيْتُكَ وَكُنْ مِنَ الشَّاكِرِينَ ﴿١٤٤﴾

(7:144) ***He said, "O Moses, I have chosen you over* (iṣṭafaytuka ʿalá) *the people with My messages and My speech. So take what I give you, and be among the grateful."***

Iṣṭifāʾ means "choosing (*ikhtiyār*) what is most refined and pure." That is why its object, *the people*, is introduced with the preposition *ʿalá* (over, on, above).[2] It should be noted that *My messages* are different from *My*

1 See volume 8 (1st ed.), pp. 61ff of the English translation, under verses 4:17-18. (Trans.)

2 That is: "I gave priority to you over the people when it came to choosing someone." Another possible explanation is that the preposition *ʿalá* (over, on, above) is used to indicate authority: "I chose you as a leader and head over

speech in this verse [because they are mentioned separately]. "Messages" refer to anything that Moses was charged with to convey to the people, including the divine commands, prohibitions, teachings, wisdoms and laws. These meanings and messages could be conveyed to him either through the intermediation of an angel, or directly cast upon his heart. Even if the messages were communicated to Moses through speech, they refer to the meanings that he received as the audience, not to the speech itself.

"Speech" refers to direct communication between God and Moses, without the involvement of an angel. "Speech" is something that unveils what the speaker holds within. What is meant here is not the kind of speech that is common among us humans. We have assigned certain sounds to certain meanings by convention, in order to direct the audience's mind to our intended meaning. When we wish to convey a meaning to another person, we create certain sound waves in the air, which originate from us and end at the audience. This form of speech requires physicality, while God is free from that. Meanwhile, God's speech should not be interpreted as the mere creation of some sound waves and vibrations in the air. That is not sufficient to show that the meaning conveyed by those sounds is in fact what God had intended to convey. One needs something beyond the sounds to uncover God's intention. This can be compared to when someone creates a knocking or beating sound to convey a meaning. In order to know what the person intends, they must have indicated to us previously, either explicitly or implicitly, that this is indeed what they mean by that sound.

In the Qur'anic accounts of God's speech with Moses, he never asks God for some indication to ascertain that this is indeed God's speech, or that this is God's intended meaning. For instance, when Moses heard the call from the right side of the Mount from the tree, he did not inquire, "Is this from you, my Lord? And is this what you mean?" Instead, he was completely certain about it. This holds about all forms of divine revelation, including those that are not through speech.

This shows decisively that the audience must have a unique connection with what is intended by the speaker of revelation. It is through that connection that the audience would know the intention behind the speech.

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the people." (Trans.)

Otherwise, just because some sound is created by God which has some meaning in a language does not grant the ascription of that meaning to God as His speech. After all, all words that are uttered by all speakers are sounds that trace to God, but they do not count as God's speech. They are rather attributed to other speakers. Similarly, it may happen that two objects collide with one another, and emit a sound that has a meaning in some language. Yet, we do not consider that to be God's speech.

In short, God's speech is when He creates a special connection and link between His audience and the unseen, such that the audience would arrive at His intended meaning through observing something of God's creation. This could be concomitant with the creation of some sounds in the air or in the ear of the audience, and it could be through other channels. We had "A Talk about the Speech of Allah" previously, and shall add a few more points in Sūrah al-Shūrá, if God wills.[1]

Either way, this verse—*He said, "O Moses, I have chosen you…* (7:144)—is meant to show God's favor upon Moses. He is also admonished to be content with being chosen by God with His messages and His speech, to be grateful for them, and not to demand more than that.

وَكَتَبْنَا لَهُ فِي الْأَلْوَاحِ مِنْ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ مَوْعِظَةً وَتَفْصِيلًا لِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ فَخُذْهَا بِقُوَّةٍ وَأْمُرْ قَوْمَكَ يَأْخُذُوا بِأَحْسَنِهَا ۚ سَأُرِيكُمْ دَارَ الْفَاسِقِينَ ﴿١٤٥﴾

(7:145) ***And We wrote for him in the Tablets*** **(al-alwāḥ, from lawḥ)** ***from all things some advice and some elaboration of all things, [and We said], "So hold on to them with power, and bid your people to hold on to the best of [what is in] them. Soon I shall show you the abode of the transgressors."***

Lawḥ is "a sheet that is designed and prepared for writing." When lightning flashes, it is said: *lāḥa al-barq*. That is the root of this term. In like manner, a tablet (*lawḥ*) manifests (*yalūḥu*) the lines that are written on it.

… from **(min)** ***all things some advice…:*** The preposition *min* is partitive (*tabʿīḍiyyah*), as one can infer from the subsequent part of the verse. *Some advice* is a descriptive addition for *all things*.

… and some elaboration **(tafṣīlan)** ***of all things…:*** The conjunction

1 See volume 4 (1st ed.), pp. 123ff of the English translation, under verse 2:253. Also see verse 42:51. (Trans.)

"and" connects *elaboration* to *advice* in the previous part of the verse. The indefinite form (*nakirah*) of "some elaboration" implies ambiguity and partition.

The effective meaning is: We wrote for Moses in the Tablets—that is, the Torah—a selection of everything. By that, what We mean is that We wrote for him some advice and some elaboration and explanation for everything with respect to religious beliefs and practices, as per the needs of his people.

This verse implies that the Torah did not cover everything that humankind needs in terms of religious teachings and laws. This can also be deduced from another verse, which says after a mention of the Torah and the Gospel: *We have sent down to you the Book with the truth, confirming what was before it of the Book, and encompassing them* (5:48). We already had a discussion on this verse.[1]

… [and We said], "So hold on to them* (fa-khudhhā) *with power, and bid your people to hold on to the best of [what is in] them…": The letter *fā*ʾ (so, therefore, then) at the beginning of this part indicates consequence and conclusion. The sentence is added to: *And We wrote for him in the Tablets*…, which indicates that the entire verse is something that was said to Moses. The implied meaning is: "We said to him, 'We have written for you in the Tablets from all things some advice, so hold fast to them.'"

"Holding on to something with power" is a metaphorical expression for determination and seriousness. If one is seriously determined about something, they will use all their power, lest they lose that thing. Therefore, holding with power is a necessary implication of serious attention and determination. The verse refers to seriousness and determination indirectly through their implication.

… and bid your people to hold on to the best of [what is in] them…: The pronoun "them" apparently refers to *all things*, including the admonitions and elaborations of rites and laws. "Holding on to the best of something" means choosing, following, and siding with goodness in all affairs. When one is concerned with what is good in all circumstances, then if they are confronted with good and evil, they would choose the good. And if they face good and better, their love for goodness would lead them to choose the better and give it a higher priority over the good. Therefore,

1 See volume 10 (1st ed.), pp. 191-192 of the English translation. (Trans.)

"holding the best" is a necessary implication of the love for beauty and goodness. Again, the verse refers to something indirectly by stating its implication. The meaning is: "Command your people to refrain from evil, and adhere to the good according to the Torah's guidance." A similar indirect expression can be found in the verse: *those who listen to the word [of Allah] and follow the best [sense] of it. They are the ones whom Allah has guided, and it is they who possess intellect* (39:18).

… Soon I shall show you the abode of the transgressors: Based on the verse's flow and connectedness, this part is about those who transgress the command mentioned just prior to it: *and bid your people to hold on to the best of [what is in] them*. As we said, they were commanded to adhere to the path of goodness in all affairs, and to follow guidance and truth. If one transgresses from this path, God will divert them from the straight path of guidance to pursue evil and error, as we shall see more elaborately in the next verse. The end of such individuals will be eternal loss and destruction. Therefore, the next verse—*Soon I shall turn away from My signs* (7:146)—is an interpretation (or almost an interpretation) of this phrase: *Soon I shall show you the abode of the transgressors* (7:145). Here are some other suggested meanings for *the abode of the transgressors*:

(1) It refers to hell, with a tone of warning and threat.
(2) It refers to the houses of Pharaoh and his people in Egypt.
(3) It refers to the houses of the tribes ʿĀd and Thamūd.
(4) It refers to the houses of the Amalekites and other tribes in the Levant. God will make the Children of Israel enter those towns to see their end.
(5) It means that a transgressing lot will come at you and rule over you.

سَأَصْرِفُ عَنْ آيَاتِيَ الَّذِينَ يَتَكَبَّرُونَ فِي الْأَرْضِ بِغَيْرِ الْحَقِّ وَإِنْ يَرَوْا كُلَّ آيَةٍ لَا يُؤْمِنُوا بِهَا وَإِنْ يَرَوْا سَبِيلَ الرُّشْدِ لَا يَتَّخِذُوهُ سَبِيلًا وَإِنْ يَرَوْا سَبِيلَ الْغَيِّ يَتَّخِذُوهُ سَبِيلًا ۚ ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمْ كَذَّبُوا بِآيَاتِنَا وَكَانُوا عَنْهَا غَافِلِينَ ﴿١٤٦﴾

(7:146) "***Soon I shall turn away from My signs those who are unjustly proud in the earth, and [even] though they should see every sign, they will not believe in it, and if they see the way of rectitude they will not take it as [their] way, and if they see the way of error they will take it as [their]***

way. That is because they deny Our signs and are oblivious to them."

All forms of *takabbur* (arrogance, pride) are unjustified, much like all *baghy* (aggression, injustice).[1] Yet, the verse qualifies pride in the earth with being unjust. Such qualifications in the Qur'an are descriptive (*tawḍīḥī*), not restrictive (*iḥtirāzī*). What is meant is to criticize and condemn the action. It means that pride and aggression are reprehensible *because* they are unjustified.

Some exegetes have suggested that *unjustly* is added as a restrictive qualification to rule out rightful forms of pride, such as showing arrogance against the enemies of God, and against those who are proud themselves. Therefore, *unjustly* serves to clarify that what is meant here is only condemnable pride.

The problem with this interpretation is that the verse does not mention "pride" unconditionally in its general sense, but it is about "pride in the earth," which means seeking ascendancy over the servants of God, enslaving them, and domineering over them. Such forms of pride are necessarily unjust.

… and [even] though they should see every sign, they will not believe in it…: The conjunction "and" shows that this is another attribute of *those who are unjustly proud in the earth*. That is, they insist on disbelief and denial [of the truth].

… and if they see the way of rectitude they will not take it as [their] way, and if they see the way of error they will take it as [their] way…: This is a similar addition to their previous descriptions. The verse explicitly mentions both the negative and positive aspects of their behavior with respect to their paths in order to show their attitude. They are very careful and highly sensitive to oppose the path of growth, and to follow the way of error. Their behavior is such that one cannot give them the benefit of the doubt, and there remains no possibility that perhaps they were ignorant or mistaken.

… That is because they deny Our signs and are oblivious to them": This sentence justifies why they have developed the above mentioned vices. It means: "They behave the way they do because of denying Our signs and being heedless of them." This sentence could also be a justification for the

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1 "Undue aggression" is mentioned in verse 7:33. See the author's exposition of the verse in volume 15 of the English translation. (Trans.)

first part of the verse: *Soon I shall turn away from My signs*.[1]

وَالَّذِينَ كَذَّبُوا بِآيَاتِنَا وَلِقَاءِ الْآخِرَةِ حَبِطَتْ أَعْمَالُهُمْ ۚ هَلْ يُجْزَوْنَ إِلَّا مَا كَانُوا يَعْمَلُونَ ﴿١٤٧﴾

(7:147) ***Those who deny Our signs and the encounter of the Hereafter, their works have failed*** **(ḥabiṭat, from ḥabṭ).** ***Shall they be requited*** **(yujzawna, from jazāʾ)** ***except for what they used to do?***

The verse's meaning should be clear. We can infer two points from this verse: First, the result of an act is the act itself. We discussed this repeatedly in our previous discussions. Second, *ḥabṭ* (cancellation, failure, annulment) is also part of one's actions which will be given to the person as their result. If one's action is a failure, then that failure will be the person's result. *Ḥabṭ* is only applicable to actions which have some aspect of good. For instance, suppose someone who has both good acts and evil acts. If their good acts are cancelled, it means that they will receive painful results for their evil deeds, but will not receive any reward for their good deeds. This amounts to an evil requital.

Another possible interpretation is that *jazāʾ* (result, requital, payment) in this verse is about good reward in particular. Therefore, *Shall they be requited except for what they used to do?* is a way of saying that they will not be rewarded for anything, because they will have no good deeds with them, since all their good deeds have failed. The Qur'an says: *We shall attend to the works they have done and then turn them into scattered dust* (25:23). The reason why *jazāʾ* here means reward in particular is that it pertains to the previous part of the verse about *their works*, which *have failed*, and the failure (*ḥabṭ*) of acts is only applicable to righteous deeds.

Some exegetes have said: There is no punishment for one who does not fulfill an obligatory act as long as they do not do anything sinful contrary to that, because this verse states that punishment is only for what one commits: *Shall they be requited except for what they used to do?*

Response: This argument is flawed because, as we explained above, *jazāʾ* (result, requital, payment) in this verse means reward. The meaning is: They will have no reward in the hereafter because they did not bring

1 The meaning would be: "I divert them from My signs *because* of denying Our signs and being heedless of them." (Trans.)

with themselves any good deeds. They did not perform any act that would be qualified for reward.

Moreover, it is almost known by necessity from the Qur'an that not performing God's commands is a sufficient condition for one's punishment, regardless of whether the person commits sinful acts contrary to that or not. God says: *and whoever disobeys Allah and His messenger, indeed there will be for him the fire of hell* (72:23). There are also other verses in this regard.

وَاتَّخَذَ قَوْمُ مُوسَىٰ مِنْ بَعْدِهِ مِنْ حُلِيِّهِمْ عِجْلًا جَسَدًا لَهُ خُوَارٌ ۚ أَلَمْ يَرَوْا أَنَّهُ لَا يُكَلِّمُهُمْ وَلَا يَهْدِيهِمْ سَبِيلًا ۘ اتَّخَذُوهُ وَكَانُوا ظَالِمِينَ ﴿١٤٨﴾

(7:148) ***The people of Moses took up in his absence a calf*** **(ʿijlan)** ***[cast] from their ornaments*** **(ḥiliyyihim)***—a body that gave out a lowing sound* **(khuwār).** ***Did they not regard that it did not speak to them, nor did it guide them to any way? They took it up [for worship] and they were wrongdoers.***

Ḥulī means "adornments and embellishments" such as gold and silver. It is the plural of *ḥaly*, just as *thudī* is the plural of *thady* (breast, mamma). *ʿIjl* means "calf." *Khuwār* (lowing, mooing) is the specific sound of cattle.

… a body that gave out a lowing sound…: This expression is an additional description for the calf. It indicates that it was not a living calf, but only emitted a lowing sound like that of cattle.

This verse and the following verses discuss the story of the Children of Israel worshiping the calf. That was when Moses had gone to the tryst of his Lord, and they felt his absence was too long. Thus the Samaritan (al-Sāmirī) deceived them, took their ornaments, and molded a golden calf that gave a lowing sound. He told them that this was their god and Moses' god. They prostrated themselves before it and adopted it as their god. The story is presented more elaborately in Sūrah Ṭā-Hā.[1] The account given in these verses does not cover the details there, which confirms the view that Sūrah Ṭā-Hā was revealed before Sūrah al-Aʿrāf. Either way, the verse can be interpreted as follows:

The people of Moses took up in his absence a calf [cast] from their ornaments…: They did so between the time that Moses had gone to the

1 See verses 20:83-97. (Trans.)

tryst of his Lord and his return. The subsequent verses talk about his angry return.

… a body that gave out a lowing sound: The calf that they adopted as god and worshiped was such.

… Did they not regard that it did not speak to them, nor did it guide them to any way?…: God chides them for not paying attention to a clear and evident criterion of reason at first sight. If the calf is really a god, then it should speak to them and guide them to the right path.

The verse mentions only two attributes of the calf which were incongruous with its divinity: it did not speak, and did not guide them to any path. There are many other attributes that also contravene divinity, such as being physical, being manufactured, being limited, being temporal, being spatial, having a shape, and so on. The two qualities mentioned in the verse—not speaking and not guiding—are among the first and foremost attributes of a god. If one is to adopt something as a god, then the servant must know what pleases that god, and how to approach it. This can only be known by some form of speech and communication from the god, which would guide the servant to the proper way of its worship. However, it was clear to the calf-worshipers that their god neither speaks to them, nor guides them to any way.

Moreover, they saw and knew from before that God spoke to Moses and guided him; and through him He also spoke to the Israelites and guided them. Yet, when the Samaritan made the calf for them, they said: *This is your god and the god of Moses, which he has forgotten* (20:88). So if the calf were really the god described by the Samaritan [that is, the God of Moses], then it should have spoke to them and guided them.

Overall, it must have been more than evident to their intellects that the calf is not their God, only if they were to think. That is why the verse adds: *They took it up [for worship] and they were wrongdoers*. It is as though one had asked: "So why did they take up the calf despite its case being so clear?" And the verse explains: *They took it up [for worship] and they were wrongdoers.*

وَلَمَّا سُقِطَ فِي أَيْدِيهِمْ وَرَأَوْا أَنَّهُمْ قَدْ ضَلُّوا قَالُوا لَئِنْ لَمْ يَرْحَمْنَا رَبُّنَا وَيَغْفِرْ لَنَا لَنَكُونَنَّ مِنَ الْخَاسِرِينَ ﴿١٤٩﴾

(7:149) ***But when they became remorseful and realized they had gone***

astray, they said, "Should our Lord have no mercy on us, and forgive us, we will be surely among the losers."

The first part of the verse literally says, "But when it fell in their hands." *Majmaᶜ al-bayān* explains:

The implied pronoun "it" in "It fell in their hands" (*suqiṭa fī aydīhim*) refers to *balāʾ* (calamity, affliction, misfortune). "Falling in hands" means that they found it right there with them, as though it were in their hands. This expression is used in cases of remorse and regret, when the person realizes something that was hidden from them. Both *suqiṭa* and *usqiṭa* are used, although *suqiṭa* is more eloquent.[1] According to some, the meaning is: "That which is harmful to them was cast in their lap."

The extensive books of *tafsīr* have offered many interpretations for this expression, but most—if not all—of them are contrived. The most plausible one is what we quoted from *Majmaᶜ al-bayān*, which has been quoted from other exegetes anonymously.[2] We can also deduce the meaning of this expression from the verse's context, as follows.

But when they became remorseful and realized they had gone astray…: That is, when they noticed what they had done, pondered over it a second time, and saw that they had gone astray. As we can see, this expression implies awareness about something that they had neglected, and insight about something that they had ignored. It is as though they did something and presented it to the person for whom they had worked, but he returned their work to themselves and threw it back at them. Then they picked it up; "it fell in their hands." Upon seeing it from near, they realized that what they had thought was wrong, and they had disregarded what they should not have disregarded. They found out that they missed something that caused their work to be ruined. At any rate, this phrase ["it fell in their hands"] is used as a proverb or figure of speech.

… Should our Lord have no mercy on us, and forgive us, we will be surely among the losers: This is an expression of their remorse and regret over what they had done and what they missed. What is mentioned in this

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1 *Suqiṭa* follows the basic verbal pattern *faᶜala*, while *usqiṭa* follows the specifically transitive verbal pattern *ifᶜāl*. Both *suqiṭa* and *usqiṭa* are in the passive voice, which is transitive by construction. (Trans.)

2 This specifically pertains to the last part of the quote from *Majmaᶜ al-bayān*. (Trans.)

verse—*But when they became remorseful…*—occurred *after* the following verses, because they realized their error only after Moses' return. This can be confirmed by the elaborate account of the same story in Sūrah Ṭā-Hā. However, it is more coherent and relevant to mention one's regret and remorse shortly after the cause of it. That is why this verse, which refers to their regret and remorse, is mentioned here, right after the last verse about their adoption of the calf.

Another reason for mentioning their remorse here is that it is expressed in the form of a prayer. As we shall see below, Moses also prayed for himself and his brother after his return. The current verse is mentioned here so that there is a separation between Moses' prayer and the apparent prayer of the Israelites.[1]

وَلَمَّا رَجَعَ مُوسَىٰ إِلَىٰ قَوْمِهِ غَضْبَانَ أَسِفًا قَالَ بِئْسَمَا خَلَفْتُمُونِي مِنْ بَعْدِي ۖ
أَعَجِلْتُمْ أَمْرَ رَبِّكُمْ ۖ وَأَلْقَى الْأَلْوَاحَ وَأَخَذَ بِرَأْسِ أَخِيهِ يَجُرُّهُ إِلَيْهِ ۚ قَالَ ابْنَ أُمَّ إِنَّ
الْقَوْمَ اسْتَضْعَفُونِي وَكَادُوا يَقْتُلُونَنِي فَلَا تُشْمِتْ بِيَ الْأَعْدَاءَ وَلَا تَجْعَلْنِي مَعَ الْقَوْمِ
الظَّالِمِينَ ﴿١٥٠﴾

(7:150) ***And when Moses returned to his people, angry and indignant* (asifan)*, he said, "Evil have you substituted me* (khalaftumūnī, from khilāfah) *in my absence! Did you lose patience* (ʿajiltum, from ʿajalah) *with your Lord's decree?" He threw down the Tablets and seized his brother by the head, pulling him towards himself. He said, "Son of my mother, indeed this people thought me to be weak, and they were about to kill me. So do not let the enemies gloat over me, and do not take me with the wrongdoing lot."***

Asaf means "intense anger and sorrow." *Asif* is a *ṣifah mushabbahah*, derived from this root.[2] *Khilāfah* means "taking up a position after some-

1 Apparently what the author means is that the two prayers are not of the same kind and at the same level. While Moses and Aaron were innocent, the Israelites were not. If one prayer were juxtaposed with the other, this point would be missed. (Trans.)

2 *A ṣifah mushabbahah* (also called *ṣifah mushbihah*) is an adjective that is similar to an active participle. It serves as an adjective, and indicates the establishment, subsistence, and strength of a quality in the subject. In this

one else." According to al-Rāghib, ʿ*ajalah* means "seeking and going after something before its time." When one says, "*ajiltu* something" it means, "I sought it before its natural time." Apparently what is meant by their Lord's *amr* (decree, command, affair, thing) is the thing for which God had given Moses an appointment, which was the revelation of the Torah.

The meaning is: When Moses was about to return to his people, God informed him that his people had deviated into error by worshiping the calf. So he returned to his people extremely outraged and resentful. He reprimanded and condemned them for what they had done. He said, "You replaced me in a very evil way. Did you hasten the decree of your Lord, and seek it before its due time? That is the decree of the One in Whose hand is your good and growth. Nothing unfolds except according to His far-reaching wisdom. The haste, desire and satisfaction of others have no impact on His decree unless He wills."

Here are a few other suggested meanings for *Did you lose patience with your Lord's decree*:

Did you rush to worship the calf before receiving a command (*amr*) from your Lord?

Did you lose patience regarding God's promise of reward for His worship? Is it that you turned to worshiping another god because you did not receive His promised reward [as soon as you wanted]?

Did you lose patience with your Lord's command, ordering you to wait until Moses returns, and to maintain his covenant in the meanwhile? Did you decide to change his covenant because you felt that his tryst was over but he did not return?

However, our interpretation is more congruous with the theme and context of the verse.

… Evil have you substituted me in my absence! Did you lose patience with your Lord's decree?…: This is a rhetorical question which implies a negation and rebuke. Moses was infuriated when he saw his people, so he took them to task.

… He threw down the Tablets…: This refers to the tablets of the Torah.

… and seized his brother by the head …: Moses grabbed his brother's hair.

… pulling him towards himself…: In Sūrah Ṭā-Hā we read that Moses

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case it means "very upset and incensed." (Trans.)

told his brother: *O Aaron! What kept you, when you saw them going astray, from following me? Did you disobey my command?* (20:92-93).

… He said…: Aaron said.

… "Son of my mother…": Aaron did not say, "my brother" or "son of my father," but mentioned their mother in order to placate Moses and arouse his compassion.

… indeed this people thought me to be weak, and they were about to kill me…: Because Aaron resisted them and opposed their worship of the calf.

… So do not let the enemies gloat over me, and do not take me with the wrongdoing lot": This would happen if Moses assumed that Aaron had also disobeyed him along with their opponents. Another thing that Aaron said, as narrated in Sūrah Ṭā-Hā, was: *I feared lest you should say, "You have caused a rift among the Children of Israel, and did not heed my word [of advice]"* (20:94).

The apparent theme and context of the verses here, and in Sūrah Ṭā-Hā, suggest that Moses was upset with Aaron just as he was cross with the Children of Israel, although not for the same reason. In Moses' view, Aaron did not put up sufficient resistance against the Children of Israel, as per his discretion that this was more expedient in that context, despite Moses' absolute instruction upon his departure: *and set things right and do not follow the way of the agents of corruption* (7:142). This much difference of opinion and style among two infallible prophets can be explained by different personality types and individual orientations. We have no evidence to reject this possibility. What contravenes infallibility is disobeying divine commands, not things that boil down to personal preference and lifestyle.

Moses grabbed the forelock of his brother and dragged him as though he was about to beat him. He did so believing that Aaron had ignored Moses' advice, and had instead followed his own opinion about what is appropriate. Moses' reaction was a disciplinary measure following an advisory command (*al-amr al-irshādī*), not a punishment for violating an authoritative command (*al-amr al-mawlawī*).[1] Not to mention that

1 An "authoritative command" (*al-amr al-mawlawī*) is like the command of a master to a servant, where the servant would be sinful for disobeying. An "advisory command" (*al-amr al-irshādī*) is like a doctor's prescription for a patient. If the patient violates it, it may have painful consequences for the patient, but it does not count as "sin." (Trans.)

even in that, Aaron was right. That is why when he narrated the story for Moses, Moses excused him and prayed for himself and his brother: *My Lord, forgive me and my brother…* (7:151).

Here are a few other suggested interpretations for *and he seized his brother by the head, pulling him towards himself*:

(1) What Moses did was because he found their act to be truly egregious, and was very upset with the situation. This can be compared to how one would pull one's own beard and bite one's lips upon intense excitement or anger. Moses treated his brother as one would treat oneself at the time of rage and resentment.

(2) Moses wanted to demonstrate his anger to his people to make them realize the intensity of their deed, which was tantamount to disbelief and apostasy. He acted this way to indicate to them the severity of their case in his eyes, so that they would abstain from the like of it in future.

(3) Moses pulled Aaron toward himself in order to whisper to him privately and ask him about the people. That is why when Aaron said what he said, Moses accepted and prayed for him.

(4) Moses noticed a similar rage and resentment in Aaron as in himself. He seized Aaron's head to caress him and to comfort his anxiety. But Aaron did not want the ignorant to take this as an expression of degradation and disdain. That is why he voiced his innocence, and Moses prayed for him.

However, most—if not all—of these interpretations are incongruous with the theme and context of the verses.

And when Moses returned to his people, angry and indignant…: This shows that Moses knew about the deviation of his people beforehand. This is mentioned explicitly in Sūrah Ṭā-Hā: *Indeed We tried your people in your absence, and the Samaritan has led them astray* (20:85). What happened when he saw his people was that he manifested his rage outwardly. He reprimanded them, threw down the Tablets, seized his brother by the head, and pulled him toward himself. He displayed these reactions once he was back among his people, not when God informed him about their error. Nevertheless, we must bear in mind that God's report is more truthful than one's sense perceptions, because our sensory perceptions sometimes betray us, while God only speaks the truth.

The explanation here is that knowledge has certain effects and

implications, while observation has other effects and implications. Anger is when our defensive faculty is excited and aroused to either defend or avenge. However, one does not express this by merely knowing about the case. A fit of anger occurs when one observes the other side's violation. That is when one would defend oneself or take revenge, either verbally or physically. But prior to seeing the other side, one's knowledge of the issue only creates inner feelings like grief, resentment, and so on. This can be compared to its opposite feelings: if you are told that a loved one whom you have not seen for a long time is about to arrive, you would have a sense of happiness upon hearing the news. But that is incomparable to your feeling and state of elation when you actually see the person. Similarly, if you observe something amusing alone, it will only create an inner sense of wonder and entertainment in you. But if you observe it with someone next to you, you will also laugh. There are other similar examples of this.

قَالَ رَبِّ اغْفِرْ لِي وَلِأَخِي وَأَدْخِلْنَا فِي رَحْمَتِكَ ۖ وَأَنْتَ أَرْحَمُ الرَّاحِمِينَ ﴿١٥١﴾

(7:151) ***He said, "My Lord, forgive me and my brother, and admit us into Your mercy, for You are the most merciful of the merciful."***

This was a supplication that Moses offered. As we explained in our discussion on forgiveness at the end of volume 6, the applicability of forgiveness goes beyond sins.[1]

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ اتَّخَذُوا الْعِجْلَ سَيَنَالُهُمْ غَضَبٌ مِنْ رَبِّهِمْ وَذِلَّةٌ فِي الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا ۚ وَكَذَٰلِكَ نَجْزِي الْمُفْتَرِينَ ﴿١٥٢﴾

(7:152) ***Indeed those who took up the calf [for worship] shall be overtaken by their Lord's wrath and abasement in the life of the world." Thus do We requite the fabricators [of lies].***

The words "wrath" and "abasement" are used in the indefinite form in this verse, which signifies greatness and immensity. The verse does not specify the implication and aftermath of this wrath and abasement, but has left them ambiguous. Therefore, multiple possibilities remain open: (1) The verse refers to their subsequent penalty, whereby the calf was burned and scattered in the sea, the Samaritan was expatriated, and a number of

1 See volume 12 (1st ed.), pp. 195ff of the English translation, under verses 5:116-120. (Trans.)

them were killed. (2) It refers to the humiliation, poverty, carnage, exile and enslavement which faced the Children of Israel. (3) "Wrath" pertains to otherworldly punishment, which means that their punishment included both misery in the hereafter and chagrin in this world.

… Thus do We requite the fabricators [of lies]: Regardless of which of the above interpretations we take, this sentence has a clear independent message. It indicates an ever-recurring divine custom with respect to fabricators of lies. They will meet God's wrath and abasement in the life of this world. This is not only what we can infer from the verse, but also supported by rational arguments, as we have repeatedly explained.[1]

وَالَّذِينَ عَمِلُوا السَّيِّئَاتِ ثُمَّ تَابُوا مِنْ بَعْدِهَا وَآمَنُوا إِنَّ رَبَّكَ مِنْ بَعْدِهَا لَغَفُورٌ رَحِيمٌ ﴿١٥٣﴾

(7:153) ***Yet [to] those who commit misdeeds but repent after that and believe—indeed, after that, your Lord shall surely be All-Forgiving, Ever-Merciful.***

The phrase "after that" is repeated in this verse. The first one refers to after they *commit misdeeds*. The second one refers to after they *repent*. The rest of the meaning should be clear.

This verse has a general meaning on its own. But in the given context, it serves as an exception for *those who took up the calf* (7:152). If one genuinely repents of *any sin*—in the true sense of repentance—then nothing can hinder its acceptance. We discussed this under the verse: *[Acceptance of] repentance by Allah…* (4:17).[2]

This verse and the last one are a digression from the story, addressed to the Prophet. We can infer this from the following expressions in the two verses: *Thus do We requite the fabricators [of lies]* (7:152) and *indeed, after that, your Lord* (7:153).[3] The context shows that the verses are reporting an

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1 Apparently the author is referring to the argument that God's rewards and punishments are not haphazard, but they are according to one's capacity and receptivity, which are in turn determined by one's beliefs, actions and realizations. (Trans.)

2 See volume 8 (1st ed.), pp. 52ff of the English translation. (Trans.)

3 These two expressions refer to God in the third person, which indicates a digression and a change of address. (Trans.)

ongoing event in the past, which is inferred from *shall be overtaken* (7:152).[1]

وَلَمَّا سَكَتَ عَنْ مُوسَى الْغَضَبُ أَخَذَ الْأَلْوَاحَ ۖ وَفِي نُسْخَتِهَا هُدًى وَرَحْمَةٌ لِلَّذِينَ هُمْ لِرَبِّهِمْ يَرْهَبُونَ ﴿١٥٤﴾

(7:154) ***And when Moses' indignation abated, he picked up the Tablets whose inscriptions contained guidance and mercy for those who are in awe* (yarhabūna, from rahbah) *of their Lord.***

Rahbah means "fear coupled with precaution."[2] The rest of the meaning should be clear.

Examining Narrations

(1) Abū Wāqid al-Laythī said: Prior to the Battle of Ḥunayn, once we went out of the city with the Messenger of God. As we passed by a lote tree (*sidr*, Christ's-thorn, ziziphus lotus), I said, "O Messenger of God! Make this a Hanging Tree (*dhāt anwāṭ*) for us, just as the pagans have a Hanging tree [for the fulfillment of wishes]." The pagans used to tie their weapons to a lote tree and cleave to it [in worship]. The Prophet said, "Glory be to God! This is like what the Children of Israel said to Moses: *make for us a god like they have gods* (7:138). Indeed you are pursuing the ways of those who were before you."[3]

Author's comment: In another similar narration it is added that there was a large lote tree, where people used to hang their weapons. Thus it was called Dhāt Anwāṭ (Hanging Tree). They used to worship that tree instead of God.[4]

(2) Concerning verse 7:138 (*We carried the Children of Israel across the*

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1 The verb in this expression is in the present tense, which indicates that the verses are about an ongoing state of affairs. (Trans.)

2 In this case it means: "Those who take guard against God's wrath fearfully, and restrain themselves reverently from displeasing their Lord." (Trans.)

3 *Al-Durr al-manthūr*, on the authority of Ibn Abī Shaybah, Aḥmad, al-Nasāʾī, Ibn Jarīr, Ibn al-Mundhir, Ibn Abī Ḥātim, Abū al-Shaykh and Ibn Mardawayh.

4 *Al-Durr al-manthūr*, via other chains of narration, on the authority of ʿAbd-Allāh b. ʿAwf, on the authority of his father, on the authority of his grandfather.

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sea…) it is narrated that once Raʾs al-Jālūt[1] told Imam ʿAlī, "You [Muslims] did not even endure thirty years after your prophet, before some of you drew out the sword against others." Imam ʿAlī quipped, "Your feet had not dried[2] from passing the sea when you said: *make for us a god like they have gods* (7:138)."[3]

(3) Imam al-Bāqir said: When Moses left his people for his Lord's rendezvous, he appointed them thirty days. When God added another ten days to the thirty, his people said, "Moses broke our promise." Thus they did what they did.[4]

(4) The Messenger of God said: When God spoke to Moses on the day of his tryst in Mount Ṭūr, He spoke in a different way from how He had spoken to him on the first day of calling him [from the burning bush]. Moses inquired, "My Lord, is this the same speech with which You spoke to me [before]?" God replied, "O Moses, I spoke to you with the power of 10,000 tongues, while I possess the power of all tongues and even more." When Moses returned to the Children of Israel, they asked, "Moses, describe the speech of the All-Merciful for us!" Moses said, "You are not capable of [hearing] it.[5] Notice the sounds of thunderbolts which you hear in the most silent solitudes.[6] That is close to it, but not

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1 This was the title of the head of the Jewish rabbis. (Trans.)

2 The elegance of this expression is remarkable. Yet, it should not be taken literally, since the Qur'an explicitly says that Moses opened *a dry path through the sea* (20:77). This supports the view that the language of the scripture is symbolic and figurative more often than not. (Trans.)

3 *Tafsīr al-burhān*, on the authority of Muḥammad b. Shahr-Āshūb.

4 *Tafsīr al-ʿAyyāshī*, on the authority of al-Fuḍayl b. Yasār.

5 Some versions say: "Glory be to God! I am not capable of [describing] it." (Trans.)

6 There are clear transcription errors in this part of the narration. The translation reflects the most plausible version. Another somewhat plausible version says: "Imagine the sounds of thunderbolts which would kill you in the sweetest manner possible if you were to hear them." The juxtaposition of a few words with two or more orthographical variations can produce a wide range of different meanings (and no-meanings). In this case, it is only a matter of where the dots are placed. (Trans.)

it."[1]

Author's comment: There is no problem with the image given at the end of this narration, because it is an analogy to make the subject more tangible. But an earlier part of the narration is somewhat ambiguous. Perhaps what is meant by 10,000 tongues is the ability of 10,000 tongues in transmitting and clarifying a message, assuming that they support one another. This is based on the fact that people have different abilities in conveying a message through their tongues. Therefore, what is meant is that God's communication clarified the meaning and unveiled what He meant in a way that 10,000 tongues would be able to do, if they were to be added together. Based on this interpretation, the difference at the beginning of the narration—where it says, "a different way from how He had spoken to him on the first day of calling him"—means a different level of communication.

(5) Hishām says: Once I was with Imam Jaʿfar b. Muḥammad al-Ṣādiq. Then Muʿawiyah b. Wahab and ʿAbd al-Malik b. Aʿyan came. Muʿawiyah b. Wahab asked the Imam, "O son of God's Messenger! Some have narrated that the Messenger of God saw his Lord. What is your opinion about that? In what form did the Prophet see God? Also, some have narrated that the believers will see their Lord in paradise. What is your opinion about that? And in what form will they see Him?" The Imam smiled and then said, "Muʿawiyah! It is a shame for someone to reach seventy or eighty years, having lived in God's kingdom and having enjoyed His blessings, but not knowing Him as He deserves to be known." Then he added, "Muʿawiyah! Muḥammad did not see the Almighty God through physical sight. Vision is of two types: the vision of the heart, and the vision of the eye. If what is meant is the vision of the heart, then the person has hit [the truth]. But if what is meant is the vision of the eye, then the person has lied and disbelieved in God and His communications, for the Messenger of God said, 'Whoever compares God to His creation has indeed disbelieved.'

"Similarly, my father narrated for me from his father, from

1 *Al-Durr al-manthūr*, on the authority of al-Bazzāz, Ibn Abī Ḥātim, Abū Nuʿaym's *Ḥilyat al-awliyāʾ*, and al-Bayhaqī's *al-Asmāʾ wa al-ṣifāt*.

al-Ḥusayn b. ʿAlī, that Once Imam ʿAlī was asked, 'O brother of God's Messenger! Have you ever seen your Lord?' 'I would never worship,' he replied, 'a Lord that I do not see. The eyes do not see Him through eyesight, but the hearts see Him through the realities of faith.' Likewise, if the believers would see their Lord through eyesight, then it means that He is created and originated, because anything that can be seen is created, and anything that is created needs some creator. And whoever compares God to His creation has associated some partners for Him.

"Shame on them! Have they not heard these words of God: *The sights do not apprehend Him, yet He apprehends the sights, and He is the Ever-Subtle, the Ever-Aware* (6:103), and these words that He said to Moses: *"You shall never see Me. But look at the mountain: if it abides in its place, then you will see Me." So when his Lord disclosed Himself to the mountain, He crumbled it, and Moses fell down swooning* (7:143)? The divine light that shined on the mountain was only as much as a ray that can pass through the eye of a needle. Thus the ground was levelled, the mountain crumpled, and *Moses fell down swooning*, which means dead. *And when he recovered*: when God returned his soul to him; *he said, 'Immaculate are You! I turn to You in penitence*: from the view of those who think that You can be seen. I return to my original knowledge of You: that the eyes do not comprehend You. *And I am the first of the believers*: in the fact that You see but cannot be seen, and that You are on a higher outlook…"[1]

(6) Imam ʿAlī said: While Moses was praising God, it also flowed from his tongue to ask:[2] *My Lord, show [Yourself] to me, that I may look at You!* His request was an immense thing; he asked for a lofty matter. God admonished him and said, "*You shall never see Me* in this world, until you die and see Me in the hereafter. But if you wish to see Me, then *look at the mountain: if it abides in its place, then you will see Me*. God disclosed some of His signs: as our Lord manifested to the mountain, it shattered into dust *and*

1 *Tafsīr al-burhān*, via its chain of narration.

2 An alternative translation is: "Moses asked this, and praise is due to God for what flowed on his tongue." (Trans.)

> *Moses fell down swooning*. Then God resurrected him and gave him a new life. Then *he said, "Immaculate are You! I turn to You in penitence, and I am the first of the believers."* It means: I am the first among them [my people] to believe that You cannot be seen.[1]

Author's comment: The last two narrations clearly confirm our interpretation of the verse. We can infer the following four points from these two narrations:[2]

1. Moses' swooning was a death, not a state of fainting. Then God returned his soul to him.

2. The Imam said that the divine light appeared "only as much as a ray that can pass through the eye of a needle." This is imagery and should not be taken literally. It is meant to explain an abstract meaning using a concrete and tangible representation. Otherwise, divine light is not physical light. Nor can it be measured by something physical like the eye of a needle. This can be confirmed by other images used in other narrations. As we shall see below, in a similar narration, the Prophet places the tip of his thumb on the tip of his little finger [for illustration]. In either analogy, what is meant is to show littleness and insignificance. Furthermore, the divine manifestation was only to the extent that would destroy and obliterate the observer. Otherwise, the divine light, in its fullness, is infinite and cannot be represented by anything with defined boundaries. One cannot make a correspondence between a limited measure and the Absolute.

3. The negative response that Moses received pertains to seeing God *in this world*. The possibility of divine vision—in the correct sense that we said [that is, decisive knowledge through the vision of the heart]—remains open for the hereafter, and Moses is deferred to then. We can deduce this from the verse: *"But look at the mountain: if it abides in its place, then you will see Me." So when his Lord disclosed Himself to the mountain, He crumbled it, and Moses fell down swooning* (7:143). This statement shows that *in principle*, the same manifestation which struck the mountain could also be experienced by Moses. The problem is that Moses would not be able to endure it, just as the mountain could not. The unveiling occurred to the mountain, and caused it to crumble and collapse. If it were to occur

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1 *Al-Tawḥīd*, via its chain of narration.

2 These points are arranged in a different order in the original text, but they were rearranged here to make the discussion easier to follow. (Trans.)

to Moses, he would likewise crumble and collapse. This means that divine manifestation is *possible* in and of itself, but it will result in the destruction and annihilation of the observer. In other words, even though God's unveiling would result in one's death [in this world], there is no logical or metaphysical impediment to it. As a matter of fact, there are *mustafīḍah* (multiple, diffused, numerous) narrations from the Imams of Ahl al-Bayt, saying that the Almighty God will manifest to the inhabitants of paradise, and they will have a visit of the divine every Friday [in the hereafter]. The same idea is mentioned in the Qur'an: *Some faces will be fresh on that day, looking toward their Lord* (75:22-23).

4. Moses' request was to see God through the vision of the heart, not through the vision of the eye. In the case of God, a physical vision of God is logically inconceivable, in any way that it may be assumed. It is also far from the status of God's Interlocutor to be ignorant of this sense of God's transcendence, which is self-evident to begin with. In fact, Moses referred to his people as "fools" because of their request to see God [through eyesight], as he prayed to his Lord: *Will You destroy us because of what the fools amongst us have done?* (7:155). How could he step in the same path as those whom he called fools?

There emerged a very heated debate around this topic from the early years of Islam, especially during the times of Imams al-Bāqir and al-Ṣādiq, up to the time of Imam al-Riḍā. The Muʿtazilites denied the physical vision of God outright, while the Ashʿarites affirmed its possibility in the hereafter. Both groups quoted this verse to support their view. There was also another group which affirmed it in both this world and the hereafter. This debate continued to persist and did not subside, except with the swords of Āl Ayyūb, who exterminated the Muʿtazilites and finished them off. Apparently that is what gave an end to this dispute.

The Muʿtazilites' position can be summarized as follows: they relied on the statement, *You shall never see Me* (7:143), as well as other scriptural evidence and rational proofs which deny physical vision. With respect to the verses and narrations that suggest physical vision, they offered other interpretations [different from their apparent meanings].

The Ashʿarites' position can be summarized as follows: they relied on the comparison made in the verse: *But look at the mountain: if it abides in its place, then you will see Me* (7:143), as well as other verses and some narrations which suggest the possibility of physical vision in the hereafter.

As with the contrary evidence and arguments, they offered other interpretations [different from their apparent meanings], just as they do in all theological discussions. Some of them argued that there is no basis for restricting physical vision to physical bodies. Rather, it is possible to see non-material things with the physical eye. One of their arguments was: (a) Physical vision is applicable to substance and accident both.[1] (b) The only common denominator between substance and accident is that they are both categories of *mawjūd* (existent, being) in its unconditional sense. (c) Hence, any existent can be observed with the eye, even if it is free from having a body or physical properties.

The implausibility of these two positions—and other similar views and arguments—is more than clear in our time and age. In fact, their invalidity can be compared to the validity of self-evident statements (*badihiyyāt*). At any rate, it is not our purpose to discuss how each group has defended itself and criticized the other side. Interested readers should refer to the books of theology and lengthy Qur'anic commentaries of each group.

We clarified two points in our exposition of the verse:

(i) It is impossible to observe God through physical vision, whether in this world or the next. This includes our current eyesight, as well as any modified and transformed vision that involves material instruments in order to perceive physical properties such as size, form, color and light. This impossibility is supported by rational arguments, as well as the Qur'anic verses and narrations which negate divine vision. As with the verses and narrations which apparently affirm divine vision, what they mean is the realization of a special form of decisive knowledge of God, which will occur in the hereafter. There are clear indications and circumstantial evidence in these scriptural sources which support this interpretation. This type of decisive knowledge—which is called vision (*ruʾyah*)—is different from the kind of knowledge that one acquires through rational argumentations and mental processes.

(ii) The subject of physical vision is completely irrelevant to this verse: *My Lord, show [Yourself] to me, that I may look at You…* (7:143). The verse neither proves nor disproves divine vision through eyesight. Neither the

1 Substance (*jawhar*) and accident (*ʿaraḍī*) are two main sub-categories of quiddity (*māhiyyah*), as discussed in Islamic and Peripatetic metaphysics. See my first footnote under the section titled "The Greatest Name of God (*al-Ism al-Aʿẓam*)" below. (Trans.)

request [from Moses] nor the reply [from God] is concerned with this type of vision. The verse is entirely and exclusively about another form of vision, which is the "vision of the heart," as coined by the narrations.

There is a long narration where al-Maʾmūn asks a series of questions to Imam al-Riḍā [about the infallibility of the prophets]. Concerning vision in this verse [7:143], the Imam explains that this was a request which Moses made on behalf of his people, not for himself. *They said, "Show us Allah visibly," whereat a thunderbolt seized them* (4:153). When God brought them back to life, they demanded Moses to request this for himself. He told them that this was impossible, but they insisted. Thus *he said, "My Lord, show [Yourself] to me"* (7:143), which means: Show Yourself to me based on my people's demand [not my own request.[1]

This narration is weak in terms of its chain of transmission, as we explained in our examination of traditions concerning Adam's garden.[2] Moreover, it contradicts the established principles in the traditions of the Imams of Ahl al-Bayt. Their traditions, particularly the sermons of Imam ʿAlī and the sayings of Imam Riḍā, are filled with the idea of the "vision of the heart." So why should the Imam accept the assumption that the request [from Moses] and the reply [from God] in this verse were about physical vision? Since the Imam takes this for granted in the above narration, he resorts to a polemical response which is not quite congruous with the verse, for it goes against its apparent meaning. It is also against the apparent attitude and style of Prophet Moses, because even if his people insisted, he would have declined their demand, just as he did elsewhere: *They said, "O Moses, make for us a god like they have gods." He said, "You are indeed an ignorant lot"* (7:138).

(7) The Prophet recited this verse, *So when his Lord disclosed Himself to the mountain, He crumbled it* (7:143), and made a gesture with two of his fingers: he placed the tip of his thumb on the tip of his little finger (or on the top joint of his little finger, according to some versions): "This is how much it was. The mountain collapsed, *and Moses fell down swooning*." Another version of the narration reads: "The mountain collapsed into the earth, and it

1 *Al-ʿUyūn* (paraphrased).

2 See volume 1, pp. 246-247 of the English translation, under verses 2:35-39. (Trans.)

continues to sink in there until the Day of Resurrection."[1]

Author's comment: Similarly, some narrations from the Imams of Ahl al-Bayt say:

1. The mountain shattered into dust.
2. It sank into the sea, and continues to sink until the [final] Hour.
3. It has been sinking up to this time.

If we interpret these narrations in light of one another, the overall meaning is that the mountain turned into dust and fell into the sea, such that no trace of it remained. This should be what is meant by statement like: "The mountain collapsed into the earth (or the sea), and it continues to sink in there until the Day of Resurrection (or the Hour)."

(8) Concerning *So when his Lord disclosed Himself to the mountain* (7:143) the Prophet said, "This is how much He disclosed," and he placed his thumb on the tip of his little finger.
Ḥumayd [who heard this from Abū Muḥammad, narrating from Anas] asked, "O Abā Muḥammad! What do you want from [narrating or believing] this?" Abū Muḥammad hit his [Ḥumayd's] chest and said, "Who are *you*, Ḥumayd? *What* are you, Ḥumayd? Anas b. Mālik has narrated this to me from the Messenger of God, then you say: What do you want from this?!"[2]

(9) The Messenger of God recited this verse, *My Lord, show [Yourself] to me, that I may look at You* (7:143) and said: God said, "Moses! If anything alive sees Me, it will die. If anything dry sees Me, it will crumble. If anything wet sees Me, it will break up. It is only the inhabitants of paradise who will see Me; those whose eyes do not die, and whose bodies do not decay."[3]

Author's comment: This is similar to a narration from Imam ʿAlī,

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1 *Al-Durr al-manthūr*, on the authority of Aḥmad, ʿAbd b. Ḥumayd, al-Tirmidhī (who has authenticated it), Ibn Jarīr, Ibn al-Mundhir, Ibn Abī Ḥātim, Ibn ʿAdī's *al-Kāmil*, Abū al-Shaykh, al-Ḥākim (who has authenticated it), Ibn Mardawayh and al-Bayhaqī's *al-Ruʾyah*, on the authority of Anas b. Mālik.

2 *Al-Durr al-manthūr*, on the authority of Abū al-Shaykh and Ibn Mardawayh, on the authority of Thābit, on the authority of Anas b. Mālik.

3 *Al-Durr al-manthūr*, on the authority of al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī's *Nawādir al-uṣūl*, and Abū Nuʿaym's *Ḥilyat al-awliyāʾ*, on the authority of Ibn ʿAbbās.

which we quoted above from *al-Tawḥīd*. We discussed its meaning above.[1]

(10) It is narrated from Imams al-Bāqir and al-Ṣādiq: Moses asked his Lord, *"My Lord, show [Yourself] to me, that I may look at You!" He said, "You shall never see Me. But look at the mountain: if it abides in its place, then you will see Me"* (7:143). So when he climbed the mountain, the gates of heaven opened and the angels came toward him in throngs. They were holding maces with lights shining from their tops. They passed by him in groups and told him, "Son of Amram (ʿImrān)! Be steadfast, for indeed you have made a mighty request." Moses stood there until our Almighty Lord manifested, where *He crumbled it, and Moses fell down swooning* (7:143). Then God returned his soul to him, when *he said, "Immaculate are You! I turn to You in penitence, and I am the first of the believers."*[2]

(11) Imam al-Ṣādiq said: When Moses son of Amram asked his Lord to look at Him, God ordered him to sit somewhere. Then He commanded the angels to pass by him in processions, with thunder, lightning, wind, and bolts. When any procession passed by him, his heart would miss a beat. He would raise his head and ask, "Which one of you is my Lord?" They would respond, "He shall come! Indeed you have made a mighty request, O son of Amram!"[3]

Author's comment: This narration is fabricated. Its content cannot be matched with any of the established principles that are deduced from the Qur'an and the sunnah.

(12) Imam al-Ṣādiq said: "Indeed the cherubim (*al-karūbiyyīn*) are a group of our followers (lit. *shīʿah*), from the first creatures.[4] God placed them behind His Throne. If the light of a single one of them is distributed among all inhabitants of the earth, it will suffice them." The Imam then said, "When Moses asked his Lord what he asked, He ordered one of the cherubim to disclose itself to the mountain, and that crumbled it."[5]

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1 See hadith 6 above, and the author's subsequent comment. (Trans.)

2 *Tafsīr al-ʿAyyāshī*, on the authority of Abū Baṣīr.

3 *Tafsīr al-ʿAyyāshī*, on the authority of Abū Baṣīr.

4 That is, they are among the first beings that God created. (Trans.)

5 *Baṣāʾir al-darajāt*, via its chain of narration, on the authority of Abū

Author's comment: Cherubim are also mentioned in the Torah. The essential point in this narration is that God's manifestation can occur through intermediaries, just like other acts that are attributed to Him, such as taking life, giving life, providing sustenance, and conveying a revelation. The Almighty God manifests through certain means, just as He takes the lives through the Angel of Death, gives life through the possessor of the Trumpet, gives sustenance through Michael, and sends revelation through Gabriel the Trustworthy Spirit. We shall discuss this narration in further detail in its appropriate place, if God wills.

(13) It is narrated that the Prophet recited the word "crumbled" in verse 7:143 as *dakkan*, not *dakkā*.[1]

(14) It is also narrated that the Prophet recited the word "crumbled" in verse 7:143 as *dakkā*, where the verse says: *So when his Lord disclosed Himself to the mountain, He crumbled it* (7:143).[2]

(15) The Messenger of God said: *So when his Lord disclosed Himself to the mountain* (7:143), six mountains flew off due to His glory. They landed in Medina as mounts Uḥud, Wariqān and Raḍwá; and landed in Mecca as mounts Thawr, Thabīr and Ḥirāʾ.[3]

(16) The Messenger of God said: When God manifested [to the mountain] for Moses, seven mountains flew off. Five of them landed in Hejaz and two in Yemen. The ones which landed in Hejaz were Uḥud, Thabīr, Ḥirāʾ, Thawr and Wariqān. The ones which landed in Yemen were Ḥaḍūr and Ṣabir [or Ṣīr].[4]

Author's comment: There are other narrations about the splitting of

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Muḥammad ʿAbd-Allāh b. Abī ʿAbd-Allāh al-Fārsī and others, via an unconnected chain of transmission (marfūʿ).

1 *Al-Durr al-manthūr*, on the authority of Ibn Mardawayh and al-Ḥākim (who has authenticated it), on the authority of Anas.

2 *Al-Durr al-manthūr*, on the authority of Ibn Mardawayh, on the authority of Anas.

3 *Al-Durr al-manthūr*, on the authority of Abū Nuʿaym's *Ḥilyat al-awliyāʾ*, on the authority of Muʿāwiyah b. Qurrah, on the authority of his father. This is also narrated in *al-Durr al-manthūr*, on the authority of Ibn Abī Ḥātim, Abū al-Shaykh and Ibn Mardawayh, on the authority of Anas.

4 *Al-Durr al-manthūr*, on the authority of al-Ṭabarānī's *al-Awsaṭ*, on the authority of Ibn ʿAbbās.

the mountain. If these narrations are meant to interpret the crumbling of the mountain, they do not match the verse. If they describe some other event [unrelated to the verse's interpretation], then it could have *possibly* occurred, but its occurrence cannot be *proven* with such solitary reports (called *āḥād* and *khabar al-wāḥid*). Not to mention the discrepancy between them concerning the number of mountains that flew off. The same can be said about the next five accounts.[1]

(17) It is narrated through both Shia and Sunni chains that the Tablets of the Torah were made of emerald.

(18) It is narrated through Sunni chains of narration that the Prophet said: The Tablets that were sent down upon Moses were from a lote tree (*sidr*) in paradise. The length of each Tablet was 12 cubits.

(19) According to another Sunni narration, God inscribed the Tablets for Moses while he could hear the creak of the pens on the Tablets.

(20) It is narrated through Shia chains of narration that the Tablets are buried in a mountain in Yemen.

(21) According to another Shia narration, a stone in Yemen swallowed the Tablets, so they are preserved in it.

Author's comment: The last five accounts are solo narrations that are not supported by decisive evidence [to authenticate them]. Not to mention that an exegetical study does not depend on a close scrutiny of such accounts. There are other similar narrations to these.

(22) It is narrated that [Imam] ʿAlī recited *khuwār* (a lowing sound) in verse 7:148 as *juʾār* and said: It means "a high-pitched sound."[2]

(23) Concerning *He threw down the Tablets…* (7:150) the Prophet said: May God have mercy on Moses! Seeing something is not like hearing about it.[3] Even though his Lord informed him that his people deviated after him, he did not drop the Tablets. But when

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1 There is no citation for the next five items since they are part of the author's comments, not direct quotes from books of hadith. (Trans.)

2 *Rūḥ al-maʿānī*.

3 There is an Arabic proverb, "News is not like seeing first-hand" (*laysa al-khabar kal-muʿāyanah*). An equivalent Persian proverb says, "Would hearing ever amount to seeing?" A Chinese proverb, which has gained some popularity in English, says: "Hearing a hundred times is not as good as seeing once." Perhaps the closest English expression for this is: "Seeing is believing." (Trans.)

he saw them with his own eyes, then he dropped the Tablets, whereby some of them broke.[1]

(24) Imam al-Ṣādiq said: "Indeed God informed Moses that his people had taken up a calf, [a body] *that gave out a lowing sound* (7:148) but that did not have the impact of seeing on him. When he saw them [in person], his anger was aroused and he dropped the Tablets." The Imam said, "Seeing [something] is superior to hearing news [about it]."[2]

(25) Imam al-Bāqir said: "If any servant makes their belief in God pure and sincere [for Him] for forty days"—or according to another version: "If any servant makes splendid remembrance of God for forty days"—"God will make them disinterested in this world, will make them see its maladies and remedies, will establish wisdom in their heart, and will make their tongue speak it." Then the Imam recited: *Indeed those who took up the calf [for worship] shall be overtaken by their Lord's wrath and abasement in the life of the world." Thus do We requite the fabricators [of lies]* (7:152) and added: "You will always see the innovators to be abased. You will always see one who fabricates a lie and attributes it to God, His Messenger, and his family abased."[3]

A Discussion of Narrations on the Vision of the Heart

Here we shall present some traditions from the Imams of Ahl al-Bayt to elucidate what is meant by the "vision of the heart."

(1) Imam al-Riḍā said in a sermon: "He is One, but not in a numerical sense. He is Apparent, but not in the sense of direct [physical] contact. He is Manifest, but not to be detectable through vision. He is Hidden, but not separate."[4]

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1 *Al-Durr al-manthūr*, on the authority of Aḥmad, ʿAbd b. Ḥumayd, al-Bazzāz, Ibn Abī Ḥātim, Ibn Ḥabbān, al-Ṭabarānī, Abū al-Shaykh and Ibn Mardawayh, on the authority of Ibn ʿAbbās.

2 *Tafsīr al-ʿAyyāshī*, on the authority of Muḥammad b. Abī Ḥamzah, on the authority of someone that he named.

3 *Al-Kāfī*, via its chain of narration, on the authority of Sufyān b. ʿUyaynah, on the authority of al-Suddī.

4 *Al-Tawḥīd* and *al-Amālī*, via its chain of narration.

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Author's comment: God's constant manifestation to His creatures is repeatedly mentioned in the words of Imam ʿAlī and the other Imams from his progeny. We quoted some of his words in our discussion of *tawḥīd* (monotheism, oneness) under the verse: *They are certainly faithless who say, "Allah is the third [person] of a trinity"* (5:73).[1]

(2) Imam al-Ṣādiq said: He is One, Absolute, Beginningless, Endless. He has no shadow to maintain Him, but He maintains all things including their shadows. He knows every unknown. He is known to every ignorant person. Neither is He *in* His creation, nor is His creation *in* Him.[2]

Author's comment: Apparently what is meant by "He is known to every ignorant person" is that everyone has a certain knowledge of God which is never covered by ignorance, nor overcome by inadvertence. This cannot be the kind of knowledge that we acquire through rational arguments, because such knowledge disappears the moment its image disappears from the mind.[3] This means that one might be ignorant of everything, but cannot be ignorant of one's Lord. Alternatively, what is meant is that God is known even to those who are apparently ignorant of Him. Here we can see, even more clearly, that the knowledge meant here is not the kind of knowledge that one acquires through rational arguments and mental processes.

"He has no shadow to maintain Him, but He maintains all things including their shadows": shadows and shades are special terms that we find in the narrations of the Imams. What is meant by the "shadow" of something is its boundary, border and limit. That is why it is negated about God, but affirmed about others.[4]

We can find an interpretation of this term in a hadith from Imam

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1 See volume 11 (1st ed.), pp. 110ff of the English translation. (Trans.)

2 *Al-Tawḥīd*, via its chain of narration, as a part of a longer hadith about tawḥīd.

3 In other words, our common learning is not actively present with us unless we pay attention to it. (Trans.)

4 Given the context of "maintenance" in this hadith, "shadow" has also been interpreted as "support," in the sense of an ontological cause that supports the existence of something. A cause is called a shadow not signifying its inferiority or weakness, but indicating its inseparability from the effect. This can be traced to the meaning of the root *ẓ-l-l*. (Trans.)

al-Bāqir concerning *dharr* (atoms, particles, ants) and *ṭīnah* (clay, substance). There he says, "God created a group of His creatures from the clay of paradise, and another group from the clay of hell. Then He raised them in shadows (*ẓilāl*)." He was asked, "What are shadows?" He explained, "Look at your shadow in the sun: it is both something and nothing."[1] This corresponds to the existential boundaries and limits of the beings. Compared to their existence, the boundaries are something else; yet, they are not really some other form of existence [but they are merely boundaries of the same being]. These boundaries give every being its unique definition and specific determination. Without them, all particulars would disappear. Perhaps this term is taken from the Verse of Shadows.[2]

(3) Imam ʿAlī said: God is much greater than being veiled from anything, or anything being veiled from Him.[3]

(4) Imam ʿAlī said: I did not see anything except that I saw God before [seeing] it.

(5) Imam ʿAlī said: I would never worship a Lord I do not see.

(6) Imam ʿAlī said: The eyes do not see Him face-to-face, but the hearts see Him through the realities of faith.[4]

(7) Abū Baṣīr says: I asked Imam al-Ṣādiq, "Will the believers see God on the Day of Resurrection." "Yes," he said, "and they have seen Him before the Day of Resurrection."
"When was that?" I inquired?
"When He asked them: *'Am I not your Lord?' They said, 'Yes indeed!'*" (7:172).
He paused in silence for a while. Then he added: "And indeed the believers certainly see Him before the Day of Resurrection *in this world*. Don't you see Him right now?"
I asked, "Can I quote you on this?"

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1 *Al-Kāfī*, via its chain of narration, on the authority of ʿAbd-Allāh b. Muḥammad al-Ḥanafī and ʿUqbah. God-willing we shall present this hadith under the verse: *but they were not to believe in what they had disbelieved in before* (10:74).

2 Apparently the author is referring to verse 16:48. The same idea is found in verse 13:15. (Trans.)

3 *Al-Irshād*. This is also narrated in other books.

4 *Nahj al-balāghah*.

> "No. Because if you narrate it, one who is ignorant of its meaning would deny it. They would assume that it is a heretical analogy and anthropomorphism. However, seeing with the heart is not the same as seeing with the eye. God is far transcendent above what the anthropomorphist and infidel says."[1]

Author's comment: This narration clearly negates two meanings of divine vision: (1) It does not mean physical vision with the eyes. (2) It does not mean a belief or conviction that the heart arrives at through proof and argument. It also shows why the word *ruʾyah* (seeing, vision) is not widely used for God in the narrations: because what the common mind understands from the term is physical vision, which is not applicable to God's sacred precinct. Otherwise, the reality of *ruʾyah* can indeed be applied to God, where it means a conscious observation of something, but not through mental argumentation and deliberation. Incidentally, there are several narrations which deny the possibility of knowing God through thinking. We will present some of them below.

(8) Imam Mūsá b. Jaʿfar said: There is no veil between Him and His creatures other than His creatures. He has veiled Himself, but not with any veil; and has covered Himself, but not with any cover. There is no god but Him, *the All-Great, the All-Sublime* (13:9).[2]

Author's comment: This narration clarifies what is meant by the knowledge of God which is already available to everyone. It is a kind of knowledge that is never overcome by ignorance, nor does it ever disappear, change, or prove wrong. It explains that what conceals God from something is that thing itself. Paying attention to other things obstructs us from paying attention to an observation and vision of the divine. The Imam then adds that nonetheless, this veil and cover is not really an obstruction. It is a veil that cannot veil, and a cover that cannot cover [the Truth].[3]

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1 *Al-Tawḥīd*, via its chain of narration.

2 *Al-Tawḥīd*, via its chain of narration, as a part of a longer hadith about tawḥīd. The same idea is also narrated from Imam al-Riḍā, in *al-Tawḥīd* and *ʿIlal al-sharāʾiʿ*.

3 The author has interpreted *maḥjūb* (veiled) as *ḥājib* (veiling), and *mastūr* (covered) as *sātir* (covering). In other words, the accusative case (based on the verbal pattern *mafʿūl*) is taken to imply the nominative case (based on the verbal pattern *fāʿil*). (Trans.)

Putting the first and the second parts of this hadith together, we can deduce that God is known to His creatures. He is not absent or hidden from them, but is present to be witnessed by them. The only issue is that they do not realize that they are constantly witnessing Him because they are occupied with themselves and are oriented toward their delimited beings. The knowledge is always there, but *knowledge of that knowledge* is missing at times.[1]

There is a hadith from Imam al-Ṣādiq, where he builds on this idea [that the knowledge of God is always present with everyone, though not always recognized]. Here is a paraphrase of it:

(9) Once someone complained to Imam al-Ṣādiq about being overwhelmed by doubts [raised by the skeptics]. The Imam asked him, "Have you ever embarked on a ship? Did it happen that the ship broke and drowned, and you remained alone on a plank of wood? Were you tossed around by the waves? Did you come to a point of despairing from all means of rescue?" The man replied in the affirmative to all these questions: "Yes, I have been there!" The Imam asked, "At that point, did your heart cling to anything [as a source of hope]?"
"Yes," he said.
"That thing is God," the Imam concluded.

(10) Imam al-Riḍā said: God's creation of the creatures is a veil between Him and them.[2]

(11) Al-Thumālī says: I asked Imam ʿAlī b. al-Ḥusayn, "Why has God veiled the people from Himself?" He said, "Because God has constructed their structure on the foundation of ignorance."[3]

Author's comment: Putting the last two narrations together, what is meant by "constructing them on a basis of ignorance" is that God has created them in a way that they get engaged and distracted with themselves.

(12) Imam al-Bāqir said: God was, and nothing else. He was Light, and darkness had no way into Him. He was Truthful, and lie had no way into Him. He was Omniscient, and ignorance had no way

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1 This is the definition of consciousness: to have knowledge of knowledge; to be aware of any feeling, thought or sensation that one experiences. (Trans.)

2 *Al-Tawḥīd*.

3 *ʿIlal al-sharāʾiʿ*, via its chain of narration.

into Him. He was All-Living, and death had no way into Him. Thus He is today. Thus He shall be forever…[1]

(13) Imam al-Riḍā said concerning the Messenger of God: Whenever he looked at his Lord with his heart, He placed him [or his heart] in a light similar to the lights of the [divine] veils, so that he may discern what is in the veils.[2]

(14) Muḥammad b. al-Fuḍayl says: I asked Abū al-Ḥasan [Imam al-Kāẓim], "Did the Messenger of God ever see his Lord?" He replied, "Yes, he saw Him with his heart. Have you not heard the verse: *The heart did not deny what it saw* (53:11)? He did not see Him with the eye, but saw Him with the heart.[3]

(15) Imam al-Ṣādiq said: Whoever thinks that they can know God through a screen, a form or an analogy, is a polytheist, because the screen, the form and the analogy are things other than Him. He is One, and must be held as One [or He is One, absolutely One]. So if someone thinks that they can know God through something else, how can they be a monotheist? Anyone who knows God, would only know Him through Himself. If someone does not know Him through Himself, then they do not know Him, but they know something else. There is nothing to intervene between the Creator and the created. God has created all things not from any [other] thing. He is called by some names, but He is other than His names, and the names are other than Him. The noun is not the same as the adjective [which describes it]. If one thinks that they believe in something without knowing it, they have missed the knowledge [of God]. No creature can comprehend anything except through God. And the knowledge of God cannot be achieved except through God. God is empty of His creation; and His creation is empty of Him.[4]

Author's comment: According to this narration, God is known to *any*

1 *Al-Maḥāsin*, via its chain of narration.

2 *Al-Tawḥīd*, via its chain of narration, as a part of a longer hadith.

3 *Al-Tawḥīd*, via its chain of narration.

4 *Al-Tawḥīd*, via its chain of narration, on the authority of ʿAbd al-Aʿlá Mawlá Āl-i Sām, as a part of a longer hadith.

creature that has *any* share of knowledge of *anything*.[1] It also explains that this knowledge is not a sort of contemplative knowledge that one acquires through instruments, indications and data. If one limits oneself to conceptual, intellectual and argumentative knowledge, then that involves ignorance about God and subtle polytheism.

We can explain this further using some premises and principles that can be deduced from the narration itself. We know that which we can comprehend. Whatever we can find and realize in our receptacle of comprehension and cognition, *that* is what we really know, not something else. If we were to know something through the intermediation of something else, then what we know in reality is the intermediary, because that is what we have comprehended, not the object at the other end. Now, is it possible that knowing the intermediary in the middle would amount to knowing the other object at the other end? This could occur only if the two are identical in one aspect. This means that the intermediary is the same as the other side in a sense, and not the same in another sense so that it can serve as a relation between the knower and the known. For instance, when we have a mental image of Zayd, that image is the same as the real Zayd outside. Otherwise, we have not perceived Zayd, but have perceived someone else. If this identity between external objects and their mental images [as their instruments and intermediaries] is denied, then all our knowledge would be ignorance.

However, there is no intermediary between the Creator and the created to serve as a relation between them. As a result, it is impossible to know God through anything other than Himself. If He is to be known through anything, that thing would be Himself. And if He cannot be known by Himself, then He cannot be known through anything else forever. If one claims that God can be known through anything else—such as some concept, principle, or external indication—then that is a subtle polytheism, because it implies that there is some intermediary between the Creator and the created, which is neither of them. Since this intermediary is not created, but stands between the Creator and the created, it would be needless of the Creator in its existence. That makes it a counterpart and partner for God. Hence, if God is to be known, He can only be known

1 This sense of knowledge can be translated as "consciousness." This confirms the view that an essential aspect of the Absolute is a consciousness principle (Sanskrit chit) that pervades all beings. (Trans.)

through Himself. And if He cannot be known through Himself, He certainly cannot be known through anything else. However, we know that God is known. Therefore, He is known by Himself. This means that "the divine essence" and "being known" are one and the same. It is impossible for God to be unknown, because His essence makes Him known. He is known by virtue of His very existence.

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God is Always Known to Everyone

But how is it that God is known to every knower [of anything]? To explain and understand this, we must bear in mind that any created being relies on God in every aspect. It is not possible to find anything that is independent of God in any way whatsoever, whether in the external world, or in the mind. The existence of any created thing is like a relation or copula that cannot be found independently from the other side—that is, the Source on which it relies—in any way. Furthermore, when we have a knowledge of anything, that thing appears in our cognitive receptacle, as we explained above. However, no created being can be found in any mode of existence unless it is supported by God and relies on Him. Otherwise, it would be an independent entity from the Absolute [not something created]. Hence, no knower can comprehend its known object unless it first comprehends God.[1]

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Now, the knower is also created, which means that it depends on God in all its aspects, including its knowledge, because the entire existence of the knower is supported by God. If the knower could have its own knowledge independently of God, then it would no longer be a created being. This means that the knower also relies on God in order to be a knower, just as the known relies on God in order to be known. So while the knower and the known are two sides of knowledge, both of them depend on some independent Source which maintains them. On the side of the known, God is what is known before anything else. If anything else is known, it is subsequent to knowing God. On the side of the knower, God is what knows before anything else. If anything else is to know, it is subsequent to God's knowing. The reader must reflect on this, and should also contemplate the verse: *they do not comprehend anything of His knowledge except*

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1 In other words, God is there with anything that is to be found, whether in the external world or in the mind. No created entity can exist alone and separate from God, because without the Cause, the effect would vanish. (Trans.)

what He wills (2:255), as well as the hadith: "I did not see anything except that I saw God before [seeing] it."

It should now be clear that God is ever known to all knowers, because any knowledge about anything can only be realized by knowing Him first. This is a necessary condition.

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Dissecting the Hadith

Let us discuss the above noble tradition [number 15] part by part:

"Whoever thinks that they can know God through a screen (*ḥijāb*), a form (*ṣūrah*) or an analogy (*mithāl*), is a polytheist." There are a few possible interpretations for the three terms in this statement: (1) Apparently *ḥijāb* (screen, veil, intermediary) means anything that is assumed to separate Him from His knower. *Ṣūrah* (form) means a mental image that corresponds to the physical qualities of the external object, such as light, color and size. *Mithāl* (analogy, symbol) means an intellectual concept beyond the visible. (2) *Ṣūrah* means a physical form, while *mithāl* means an imaginary form [which is conceived and constructed mentally]. (3) *Ṣūrah* means a bare concept that is grasped and conceived (*taṣawwur*), while *mithāl* means a statement that is predicated and confirmed (*taṣdīq*). Either way, all intellectual and mental knowledge would be included under these categories. There are very many narrations which deny the possibility of comprehending God through intellectual and mental knowledge.

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Such knowledge of God [through a screen, form or analogy] would be polytheism because it implies that there is something out there that is neither the Creator nor created. At the same time, it serves as an intermediary for knowing God, which means that it is the same as Him in a sense, and different from Him in another sense. We already explained this above. Thus the Imam continues:

"He is One, and must be held as One [or He is One, absolutely One]." That is, there is no associate or partner in the divine essence in any way whatsoever. Any such overlap would result in the divine essence being compound and mixed, and that would cancel His oneness. One example of such overlap is knowledge through a mental image. The mental image partakes of the meaning and quiddity of the known object in the external world, but does not share its existence. This makes the known object be composed of quiddity and existence.[1]

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1 Thus all created beings are stripped of oneness, because they are composed of *māhiyyah* (quiddity, whatness) and *wujūd* (existence, being). (Trans.)

"So if someone thinks that they can know God through something else, how can they be a monotheist?" Such a person effectively holds that there is some composition in the divine essence, and there is some counterpart and partner for God in existence.

"Anyone who knows God, would only know Him through Himself." That is, one can only know God through knowing the divine essence, not through some intermediary.

"If someone does not know Him through Himself, then they do not know Him, but they know something else." The next sentence explains why: "There is nothing to intervene between the Creator and the created." That is, there is nothing else besides them to connect them to one another.

"God has created all things not from any [other] thing." There is no other thing to serve as a link between them, connecting the Creator to the created, and vice versa. For instance, what connects an artisan to their artifact is the mental image in the artisan's mind, and the raw material that they use.

"He is called by some names, but He is other than His names." This is an answer to an implied question (called a prolepsis). One might object here: "We know God through His names which describe His beauty and majesty." So the Imam anticipates and answers that possible objection by saying that the very act of using names to denote God necessitates some distinction and difference between Him and those names. Otherwise, knowing Him through His names would be the same as knowing Him through Himself, not through anything else. The Imam then reiterates this by saying that names to the divine essence are like adjectives to a noun, "The noun is not the same as the adjective [which describes it]."

One might raise another objection here: "We believe in a God that we do not know. It is not possible for us to know Him by Himself. We can only know Him through His signs. This can be called a knowledge of God only in a figurative sense." Thus the Imam answers: "If one thinks that they believe in something without knowing it, they have missed the knowledge [of God]." One who makes the above claim does not really know what they are saying, because they certainly comprehend *something*, and there is no point trying to deny that.

"No creature can comprehend anything except through God." Thus, every knower [of anything] knows God. It is not possible to know anything through God without knowing Him first.

"And the knowledge of God cannot be achieved except through God." There is no other way to realize this.

"God is empty of His creation; and His creation is empty of Him." That is, there is no common relation in some middle ground between the Creator and the created.

Based on this narration, any being that has any share of knowledge, intelligence and consciousness, knows God by necessity. The only thing is that many knowers are ignorant of their knowledge, and confused in this regard. One who knows God, would know Him by Himself, and would realize that: (i) they know God; (ii) they know everything else through Him. There are also other narrations which express some of the points mentioned in this hadith.

The reader should know that the narrations in this regard from the Imams of Ahl al-Bayt are numerous indeed. There is no need to quote them all here. In addition, we did not open a philosophical chapter on this subject of vision because most of the narrations discussed above are philosophical in nature. That is why there was no need for a separate philosophical discourse.

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Verses 155-160

وَ اخْتارَ مُوسى قَوْمَهُ سَبْعِينَ رَجُلاً لِمِيقاتِنا فَلَمَّا أَخَذَتْهُمُ الرَّجْفَةُ قالَ رَبِّ لَوْ شِئْتَ أَهْلَكْتَهُمْ مِنْ قَبْلُ وَ إِيَّايَ أَ تُهْلِكُنا بِما فَعَلَ السُّفَهاءُ مِنَّا إِنْ هِيَ إِلاَّ فِتْنَتُكَ تُضِلُّ بِها مَنْ تَشاءُ وَ تَهْدِي مَنْ تَشاءُ أَنْتَ وَلِيُّنا فَاغْفِرْ لَنا وَ ارْحَمْنا وَ أَنْتَ خَيْرُ الْغافِرِينَ ﴿١٥٥﴾ وَ اكْتُبْ لَنا فِي هذِهِ الدُّنْيا حَسَنَةً وَ فِي الْآخِرَةِ إِنَّا هُدْنا إِلَيْكَ قالَ عَذابِي أُصِيبُ بِهِ مَنْ أَشاءُ وَ رَحْمَتِي وَسِعَتْ كُلَّ شَيْءٍ فَسَأَكْتُبُها لِلَّذِينَ يَتَّقُونَ وَ يُؤْتُونَ الزَّكاةَ وَ الَّذِينَ هُمْ بِآياتِنا يُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿١٥٦﴾ الَّذِينَ يَتَّبِعُونَ الرَّسُولَ النَّبِيَّ الْأُمِّيَّ الَّذِي يَجِدُونَهُ مَكْتُوباً عِنْدَهُمْ فِي التَّوْراةِ وَ الْإِنْجِيلِ يَأْمُرُهُمْ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَ يَنْهاهُمْ عَنِ الْمُنْكَرِ وَ يُحِلُّ لَهُمُ الطَّيِّباتِ وَ يُحَرِّمُ عَلَيْهِمُ الْخَبائِثَ وَ يَضَعُ عَنْهُمْ إِصْرَهُمْ وَ الْأَغْلالَ الَّتِي كانَتْ عَلَيْهِمْ فَالَّذِينَ آمَنُوا بِهِ وَ عَزَّرُوهُ وَ نَصَرُوهُ وَ اتَّبَعُوا النُّورَ الَّذِي أُنْزِلَ مَعَهُ أُولئِكَ هُمُ الْمُفْلِحُونَ ﴿١٥٧﴾ قُلْ يا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنِّي رَسُولُ اللَّهِ إِلَيْكُمْ جَمِيعاً الَّذِي لَهُ مُلْكُ السَّماواتِ وَ الْأَرْضِ لا إِلهَ إِلاَّ هُوَ يُحْيِي وَ يُمِيتُ فَآمِنُوا بِاللَّهِ وَ رَسُولِهِ النَّبِيِّ الْأُمِّيِّ الَّذِي يُؤْمِنُ بِاللَّهِ وَ كَلِماتِهِ وَ اتَّبِعُوهُ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَهْتَدُونَ ﴿١٥٨﴾ وَ مِنْ قَوْمِ مُوسى أُمَّةٌ يَهْدُونَ بِالْحَقِّ وَ بِهِ يَعْدِلُونَ ﴿١٥٩﴾ وَ قَطَّعْناهُمُ اثْنَتَيْ عَشْرَةَ أَسْباطاً أُمَماً وَ أَوْحَيْنا إِلى مُوسى إِذِ اسْتَسْقاهُ قَوْمُهُ أَنِ اضْرِبْ بِعَصاكَ الْحَجَرَ فَانْبَجَسَتْ مِنْهُ اثْنَتا عَشْرَةَ عَيْناً قَدْ عَلِمَ كُلُّ أُناسٍ مَشْرَبَهُمْ وَ ظَلَّلْنا عَلَيْهِمُ الْغَمامَ وَ أَنْزَلْنا عَلَيْهِمُ الْمَنَّ وَ السَّلْوى كُلُوا مِنْ طَيِّباتِ ما رَزَقْناكُمْ وَ ما ظَلَمُونا وَ لكِنْ كانُوا أَنْفُسَهُمْ يَظْلِمُونَ ﴿١٦٠﴾

(7:155) *Moses chose seventy men [from] his people for Our tryst, and when the earthquake seized them, he said, "My Lord, had You willed, You would have destroyed them and me before. Will You destroy us because of what the fools amongst us have done? This is only Your trial by which You lead astray whomever You will and guide whomever You will. You are our Master, so forgive us and have mercy on us, for You are the best of forgivers.*

(7:156) *And prescribe goodness for us in this world and the Hereafter, for indeed we have come back to You." Said He, "I visit My punishment on whomever I will, but My mercy embraces all things. Therefore I shall prescribe it for those who are Godwary and give the alms and those who believe in Our signs*

(7:157) *—those who follow the Messenger, the unschooled prophet, whose mention they find written with them in the Torah and the Gospel, who bids them to do what is right and forbids them from what is wrong, makes lawful to them all the good things and forbids them from all vicious things, and relieves them of their burdens and the shackles that were upon them—so those who believe in him, honor him, and help him and follow the light that has been sent down with him, they are the felicitous."*

(7:158) *Say, "O humankind! I am the Messenger of Allah to you all, [of Him] to Whom belongs the kingdom of the heavens and the earth. There is no god except Him. He gives life and brings death. So have faith in Allah and His Messenger, the unschooled prophet, who has faith in Allah and His words, and follow him so that you may be guided."*

(7:159) *Among the people of Moses is a nation who guide [the people] by the truth and do justice thereby.*

(7:160) *We split them up into twelve tribal communities, and We revealed to Moses, when his people asked him for water, [saying], "Strike the rock with your staff," whereat twelve fountains gushed forth from it. Every tribe came to know its drinking-place. And We shaded them with clouds, and We sent down to them manna and quails: "Eat of the good things We have provided you." And they did not wrong Us, but they used to wrong [only] themselves.*

Introduction

These verses present another chapter of the stories of the Israelites. They describe many signs which God sent down to them as a special favor to them in order to guide them to the path of truth and show them the way of *taqwá* (Godwariness, self-restraint). However, they denied His signs and thus wronged themselves.

Commentary

وَ اخْتارَ مُوسى قَوْمَهُ سَبْعِينَ رَجُلاً لِمِيقاتِنا فَلَمَّا أَخَذَتْهُمُ الرَّجْفَةُ قالَ رَبِّ لَوْ شِئْتَ أَهْلَكْتَهُمْ مِنْ قَبْلُ وَ إِيَّايَ أَ تُهْلِكُنا بِما فَعَلَ السُّفَهاءُ مِنَّا إِنْ هِيَ إِلاَّ فِتْنَتُكَ تُضِلُّ بِها مَنْ تَشاءُ وَ تَهْدِي مَنْ تَشاءُ أَنْتَ وَلِيُّنا فَاغْفِرْ لَنا وَ ارْحَمْنا وَ أَنْتَ خَيْرُ الْغافِرِينَ ﴿١٥٥﴾

(7:155) ***Moses chose seventy men [from] his people*** **(qawmahu)** ***for Our tryst, and when the earthquake seized them, he said, "My Lord, had You willed, You would have destroyed them and me before. Will You destroy us because of what the fools amongst us have done? This is only Your trial by which You lead astray whomever You will and guide whomever You will. You are our Master, so forgive us and have mercy on us, for You are the best of forgivers."***

The preposition *min* (from) is implied in this verse. That is why the word *qawm* is *manṣūb* in terms of inflection; it is due to the omission of a particle that assigns the oblique case (*nazᶜ al-khāfiḍ*).

We can deduce from this verse that God appointed a tryst for the Israelites, and seventy of them, selected by Moses, attended it. That must have been a great event, but the Qur'an does not specify what was the purpose for their presence in that place. It only says that they were overtaken by an earthquake, which could only be a result of a great sin that they had committed.

… My Lord, had You willed, You would have destroyed them and me before. Will You destroy us because of what the fools amongst us have done?… This statement of Moses shows that the earthquake resulted in their death. This clarifies that the story discussed here is the same as the story mentioned in these verses: *And when you said, "O Moses, we will not*

believe you until we see Allah visibly." Thereupon a thunderbolt seized you as you looked on. Then We raised you up after your death so that you might give thanks (2:55-56); *The People of the Book ask you to bring down for them a Book from the sky. Certainly they asked Moses for [something] greater than that, for they said, "Show us Allah visibly," whereat a thunderbolt seized them for their wrongdoing. Then they took up the Calf [for worship], after all the manifest proofs that had come to them. Yet We excused that* (4:153).

Matching these verses with the current verse, we can infer that what is meant by *rajfah* (earthquake) here is *ṣāʿiqah* (thunderbolt). Contrary to what some exegetes have said, *rajfah* here does not mean a shiver that entered their bodies. We should have no reservation about interpreting *rajfah* (earthquake) as *ṣāʿiqah* (thunderbolt) because the same equivalence can be deduced from two verses which describe what happened to the tribe of Prophet Ṣāliḥ: *So the earthquake* (al-rajfah) *seized them, and they lay lifeless prostrate in their homes* (7:78); *So the bolt* (ṣāʿiqah) *of a humiliating punishment seized them* (41:17).

Based on verse 4:153, which we quoted above, we can infer the following points: (1) Their request to see God was related to the revelation of the scripture. (2) Their adoption of a calf [as a god] occurred afterwards. It seems that they first went to the tryst in order to receive the Torah, and there they requested to see God visibly in order to ascertain that this is indeed a divine book which is sent from God. After all, those whom Moses chose were apparently believers in his basic mission as a prophet of God. Therefore, when they said, *we will not believe you until we see Allah visibly* (2:55), what they meant was that they need to see God in order to believe in the Torah as a divine revelation [not in order to believe in Moses as God's messenger in general].

The above points suggest that the story in the current verse was part of Moses' tryst with God, where the Torah was revealed to him. That is: When Moses wanted to set out for the tryst of his Lord and receive the Torah, he chose seventy individuals from his people. They went with him to Mount Ṭūr, but they were not satisfied with God speaking to His Interlocutor [that is, Moses]. Instead, they requested to see God. Thus the thunderbolt overtook them and they died. God brought them back to life upon Moses' prayer. Then God spoke to Moses, and that is when Moses requested to see Him [7:142-145]. The other events occurred afterwards, one of which was the adoption of the calf by the Israelites. They did that

during the absence of Moses and the seventy elite, when they had gone to God's tryst. This interpretation is found in some narrations from the Imams of Ahl al-Bayt, as we shall see below, by God's will.

It should be clarified that the main theme and purpose of this verse is the following points: (1) The Israelites wronged themselves. (2) God punished them. (3) Moses prayed for them. There is no evidence in the verse to show whether this event was part of the previous story [of Moses' tryst, in verses 7:142-145] or it was a separate event. The verse is not concerned with that point.

Other Views on the Verse

Here are a few other interpretations suggested by some exegetes:

(1) Apparently what is mentioned here is a different story from the previous one [in verses 7:142-145]. It is not eloquent to present a part of a story, then digress to another subject, and then come back to the first discussion again. The Book of God is free from such inconsistency. Moreover, if the earthquake was a result of their request to see God, then Moses should have said, "*Will You destroy us because of what the fools amongst us have* said?" But the word used in the verse is "done" instead of "said," and there is no speech narrated from them here. There is no evidence that it was in the same occasion where they said: *Show us Allah visibly* (4:153). Instead, we should deduce three distinct events: (i) their request to see God, whereby they are killed by the thunderbolt; (ii) Moses' tryst and his swooning; (iii) the tryst of the seventy, and their overtaking by the earthquake.

(2) This tryst was different from the first tryst [in verses 7:142-145]. When the Israelites worshiped the calf, God ordered Moses to come with a group of them to Mount Ṭūr in order to ask forgiveness for worshiping the calf. So Moses selected seventy of them, who went to Mount Ṭūr and said what they said. As a result, the quake took seized them in their bodies. Just as they were about to die from that, they were relieved of the seizure because of Moses' prayer.

(3) When Aaron died, the Children of Israel accused Moses for it: "You were envious of him among us, so you killed him!" As they insisted on this, he selected seventy of them, including Aaron's son. They went to Aaron's grave, where Moses talked to him and Aaron spoke back, exonerating Moses from his murder. They said, "We are not convinced, Moses.

Call your Lord to make us prophets." That is when the quake seized them, and they fell swooning.

(4) The Children of Israel requested to see God. Moses selected seventy of them, and they went to Mount Ṭūr. There they said what they said, and were seized by the earthquake, which killed them. Then God revived them because of Moses' prayer. This was an independent story, not part of Moses' tryst with God.

Review of the above Interpretations

Here are a few points to clarify concerning the above suggested views:

(1) None of these views, especially the first two, can be supported by any textual evidence from the Qur'an, nor by any reliable hadith.

(2) We shall discuss these in further detail in our examination of narrations below, if God wills.

(3) It is not rare in the Qur'an to dissect a single story into several parts, and move from one discussion to another in the interest of some objective. If the Qur'an were a story book, then it would be unbefitting of it to leave a story before its completion. But it is not. It is a book of guidance, direction and wisdom. It takes from each story those parts which are relevant to its message.[1]

(4) Their sin [that is, the request to see God visibly] was a speech, but the verse refers to it as an act: *what the fools amongst us have done* (7:155). It is called a *fiʿl* (doing, action) in the sense that it was an act of disobedience (*maʿṣiyah*). Disobedience is considered to be an act, even though it may be in the form of a speech. God says [to the disbelievers]: *You are only being requited for what you used to do* (66:7), but that also includes their words of disbelief, lying, allegation and so forth. Apparently the Israelites were punished for the *necessary implications* of their speech, such as lack of proper manners [of servitude], animosity, and disrespect for their Lord's status. It should also be noted that in all of the above suggested views, the quake seized the Children of Israel because of what they *said*, not what they *did*. Therefore, if that were a problem, it would equally apply to all the above interpretations.

Given the above, it is most plausible to hold this story as part of the previous story, as we explained.

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1 In other words, digression is not necessarily against eloquence. (Trans.)

Back to the Verse

… My Lord, had You willed, You would have destroyed them and me before. Will You destroy us because of what the fools amongst us have done? This is only Your trial by which You lead astray whomever You will and guide whomever You will…: Moses wanted God to bring the seventy elite back to life, lest the Children of Israel would accuse him [of killing them], which would amount to their apostasy. That would have rendered his entire mission fruitless. That was his real request, but he had to set the grounds for it. He was facing some grievous disobedience from his people, which caused their death. He was in a position where God's intense wrath had been kindled and had surrounded the Israelites, to the point that it destroyed them. That is why Moses began to gradually build his way and arouse God's mercy through praising Him. He first had to stir the divine compassion and kindness.[1] He needed to evoke God's mercy over His wrath, then he could move on to make his request and express what he needed, without any impediments to its fulfillment.

… he said, "My Lord…": Moses began by invoking God's Lordship, which is an appeal to God's mercy.

… had You willed, You would have destroyed them…: It is all up to Your will and decision.

… and me before…: This way my people would not blame me for the death of their elite.

… Will You destroy us because of what the fools amongst us have done? …: It does not befit Your mercy, nor is it part of Your eternal custom as a Lord to penalize a people because of some act of the fools among them. Moses said this in the form of a question as an expression of courtesy.

… This is only Your trial* (fitnatuka) *by which* (*bihā*)*…: What is meant by *fitnah* (temptation, trial) here is a test. The pronoun in *bihā* (by which) refers to *fitnah*.

… You lead astray whomever You will and guide whomever You will…: This event is one example of Your universal tests and trials that You constantly conduct and apply to Your servants, so that their error or guidance may come to actualization. It is not part of Your eternal custom to destroy anyone who fails in Your trials and deviates from the straight

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1 This is a rather anthropomorphic representation of God. The author's expressions here should be viewed as symbolic and poetic elegance, not as literal or metaphysical statements. (Trans.)

path. In short, Your mercy takes precedence over Your wrath. It is not Your wont to hasten to punish the sinners, or to penalize them for the acts of their fools. You sent me to my people and promised to support me to succeed in my mission. However, the destruction of this group will elicit accusations against me from my people.

… You are our Master, so forgive us and have mercy on us, for You are the best of forgivers: Here Moses presents his request, after his praise of God. He began by invoking the divine *wilāyah* (mastership, guardianship, authority) which exclusively belongs to God: *You are our Master* (waliyyunā). And He ended by invoking God's forgiveness, which is the best forgiveness. Between these two qualities, Moses expressed his request: *so forgive us and have mercy on us*. This is the best request that God would like His servants to ask Him. Moses did not explicitly mention his specific wish in his prayer—which was the resurrection of the seventy individuals whom God had destroyed—due to humbleness and *ḥayāʾ* (modesty, shame).

In Sūrah al-Baqarah, God clearly says that He resurrected them after their death [2:56]. He would not do so after destroying them without any intercession from Moses. Meanwhile, the only supplication in the Qur'an that is relevant to this case is what we read here. Hence, Moses' request [to have them resurrected] is included in this prayer: *so forgive us and have mercy on us*. As we said, he expressed his request indirectly, not explicitly.

وَاكْتُبْ لَنَا فِي هَٰذِهِ الدُّنْيَا حَسَنَةً وَفِي الْآخِرَةِ إِنَّا هُدْنَا إِلَيْكَ ۚ قَالَ عَذَابِي أُصِيبُ بِهِ مَنْ أَشَاءُ ۖ وَرَحْمَتِي وَسِعَتْ كُلَّ شَيْءٍ ۚ فَسَأَكْتُبُهَا لِلَّذِينَ يَتَّقُونَ وَيُؤْتُونَ الزَّكَاةَ وَالَّذِينَ هُمْ بِآيَاتِنَا يُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿١٥٦﴾

(7:156) ***"And prescribe* (uktub) *goodness for us in this world and the Hereafter, for indeed we have come back* (hudnā) *to You." Said He, "I visit My punishment on whomever I will, but My mercy embraces all things. Therefore I shall prescribe it for those who are Godwary and give the alms and those who believe in Our signs."***

The imperative verb *uktub* (lit. write, prescribe) refers to God's definite decree (*qaḍāʾ*). The verb *hudnā* is derived from *hāda yahūdu*, which means "to return." The meaning is: We have returned and come back to You.

This verse is another chapter of Moses' supplication. Here he requests

goodness in this world and goodness in the hereafter. Clearly, what is meant by goodness is a good life. This hinges on going back to God, which means following His path and adhering to the way of one's divine intuition (*fiṭrah*). Such course of action leads one to a good life and a blissful existence, both in this world and in the hereafter. This shows that *for indeed we have come back to You* is an explanation and justification for his request in this verse, because of the causal link between going back to God and having a good life. This can be part of God's *rizq* (provision, sustenance) for them in the future. That is why Moses asked this to be written and decreed for them: *And prescribe…*

… for indeed we have come back to You…: As we said, this sentence justifies Moses' requests in this verse, not the last verse. The justification for his previous requests—*forgive us and have mercy on us* (7:155)—was what he said in the last verse, and the two expressions that surrounded his request: *You are our Master* and *You are the best of forgivers* (7:155). The reader should reflect on this.[1]

… Said He, "I visit My punishment on whomever I will, but My mercy embraces all things…": This is God's response to Moses. This sentence corresponds to the first statement of Moses: *My Lord, had You willed, You would have destroyed them and me before* (7:155). God qualifies His punishment by *on whomever I will*, but His embracing mercy is not qualified by anything. The reason for this difference is that God's punishment is always preceded and elicited by some calling from the one who is punished. It never starts with God, as He says: *Why should Allah punish you if you give thanks and be faithful?* (4:147); *If you are grateful, I will surely enhance you [in blessing], but if you are ungrateful, My punishment is indeed severe.* (14:7). His Lordship does not necessitate anyone's punishment. If that were the case, then He should have punished everyone. Instead, He punishes only those whom He wills, and His will only applies to those who are ungrateful to His blessings. Hence, His punishment hinges on some preponderance (*iqtiḍā'*) on the part of the one who is punished, due to their *kufr* (ungratefulness, disbelief). It is not His own wont and initiative.

To be more precise, we can deduce from the Qur'an that the reality of punishment is non-existential. Punishment is the lack of mercy, and

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1 The author's point here is that there must be some congruity between a prayer and what qualifies one for its fulfillment. (Trans.)

vengeance is not bestowing blessings. That occurs when the recipient lacks the capacity to be embraced by God's mercy and receive His blessings due to ungratefulness and sin. Therefore, the real cause of punishment is lacking the required capacity for mercy.

This is unlike God's extensive mercy and the effusion of His blessings. They directly issue from God since He is God. These qualities are necessary implications and outcomes of His Lordship. The existence of every being is a blessing for itself, and also for many other beings based on the interconnectedness of different parts of creation. Moreover, anything else that it may have, whether pleasant or unpleasant, is also a blessing. Sometimes it is a blessing for that being and as well as other beings, such as one's power and wealth, which benefit the person and others. And sometimes it is a blessing for other beings, as in the case of misfortunes that occur to a being, like illnesses, defects and disasters: That being is harmed by these events, but other beings benefit from it. Therefore, divine mercy is all-embracing, not just potentially, but actually. It is not restricted to any person, being or realm. It pervades the faithful and the unfaithful, the sentient and the non-sentient, this world and the hereafter. And divine will is a concomitant of it.

There is also a *relative* sense of divine mercy which we deduce from comparing certain conditions to others. When some event is viewed to be a punishment or misfortune, then, in *comparison*, its opposite would count as mercy. For instance, suppose some people are deprived of some blessing, while others get to enjoy it. If the first case is a punishment, then the second case would be a mercy. Similarly, when we consider a painful and disturbing event to be a punishment, like some disaster in this world or the hereafter, its opposite peace and security would be a mercy in contrast. Nevertheless, in *absolute* terms, divine mercy includes both of these opposites.

Divine mercy can be classified into two types: (1) universal mercy; (2) particular mercy. All beings enjoy the universal mercy of God: believers and unbelievers, good-doers and evil-doers, sentient beings and non-sentient beings. Their very existence at the beginning is by this mercy, and their sustenance and subsistence are also by this mercy as long as they continue to exist. The particular mercy of God is a pleasant gift that He bestows upon His servants as a reward for their belief and servitude. This mercy is rather restricted to righteous believers. Through this mercy

they enjoy a luminous and blissful life in this world, and God's satisfaction and paradise in the hereafter. The disbelievers and sinners have no share of this mercy.

Punishment is an unpleasant state that *particularly* strikes the disbelievers and sinners due to their disbelief and sin. In this world it appears as a distressful life or an exterminating punishment; and in the hereafter it appears as hell and its pains. Punishment is the opposite of God's *particular* mercy, while there is no punishment in contrast to His *universal* mercy. Whatever can be called a "thing" (*shayʾ*) is an instance of God's universal mercy, either for itself or for others. And it is this aspect of its existence—that is, the aspect of being a mercy—which is intended by its creation. And beyond what can be called a "thing" there is only non-existence.[1]

… I visit My punishment on whomever I will, but My mercy embraces all things…: Based on what we just said, this sentence is about God's particular [and only] punishment, and His universal mercy. While there no contrast between the two, the verse mentions the divine universal mercy as a prelude and preparation for what comes next, which is the prescription of the divine particular mercy for those who are Godwary among the believers.

… but My mercy embraces all things…: A number of exegetes have said that this sentence is also qualified by *whomever I will*, which is omitted but implied. However, as we explained above, this sentence describes God's universal mercy, which is not potential or conditional. It is an unconditional actuality which encompasses all things already. Of course, God has willed this, but the divine will in this case is inseparable from His mercy.[2]

… Therefore I shall prescribe it for those who are Godwary and give the alms and those who believe in Our signs: This sentence is mentioned as a consequence and conclusion of the previous statement—*I visit My punishment on whomever I will, but My mercy embraces all things*—as indicated by the letter *fāʾ* (therefore, so, then) at the beginning of the sentence. That is: Since My punishment strikes some people, while My mercy embraces all things, it must follow that I prescribe My mercy for the

1 In other words, any person, object or occurrence that exists is an example of a "thing," and all things are embraced by God's universal mercy. (Trans.)

2 That is, He has willed His universal mercy to be absolute and unrestricted. (Trans.)

rest [in particular]. They are *those who are Godwary and give the alms…*

God's conclusion here is not concerned with Moses' people alone, because He does not say: "those of *you* who…" Instead, He speaks in general terms about Godwariness, paying alms, and belief in divine signs, which anyone could have. This is rather a natural way of expression, because the premises and preludes to it were also in general terms: *I visit My punishment on whomever I will…*

If we match God's response with Moses' statement said at the beginning of the verse, what God says here would serve as a qualification for Moses' request. Moses requested goodness and mercy for his people, and justified it by saying: *for indeed we have come back to You* (7:156). This means that he requested mercy for anyone among his people who returns to God. He asked God to prescribe for them the good of this world and the hereafter merely for their return and repentance to Him. But God's response was that He will prescribe His mercy for those who believe and are Godwary.[1] Therefore, He added more conditions before approving Moses' request. Their conversation can be paraphrased and elaborated as follows:

Moses: Prescribe Your mercy for those of us who return to You.

God: I shall prescribe My mercy for those who return, are Godwary, and believe in My signs.

There is no problem with this qualification and addition of conditions. After all, God is also the guide and teacher of His prophets and messengers. Moses' request was initially conditional on return to God, which amounts to *īmān* (belief, faith). God taught His Interlocutor [Moses] to make his request conditional on both *taqwá* (Godwariness, self-restraint) and *īmān*. *Taqwá* means restraint from what is unlawful. *Īmān* means accepting God's prophets and the laws that are revealed to them. Hence, God modified Moses' prayer by restricting it.[2] Another similar modifi-

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1 The author does not mention "alms" separately because it is a branch of *taqwá* (Godwariness, self-restraint, piety). That is why the phrase those who is only mentioned before Godwariness and belief, but not before alms. The verse explicitly points out alms for emphasis, and perhaps because of its special applicability to the Israelites. (Trans.)

2 Moses spoke in the past tense: for indeed we have come back (*hudnā*) to You, but God replied in the present tense: those who are Godwary (*yattaqūna*) and give (*yuʾtūna*) the alms and those who believe (*yuʾminūna*) in Our signs.

cation through restriction is found in the story of Abraham: *He said, "I am making you an imam for humankind." Said he, "And from among my descendants?" He said, "My covenant does not extend to the unjust"* (2:124). God also modified another request of Abraham through extension and generalization: *"and provide its [Mecca's] people with fruits—such of them as have faith in Allah and the Last Day," He said, "As for him who is faithless, I will provide for him [too] for a short time, then I will shove him toward the punishment of the Fire, and it is an evil destination"* (2:126).

Here we can conclude two points about Moses' requests:

(1) The verse implies that God answered and granted the second part of Moses' prayer: *And prescribe goodness for us in this world and the Hereafter*, albeit with some qualification, as we explained. It is surprising that some exegetes have said that the verse's construction shows that God rejected Moses' request and did not grant it. Similarly, some have said that while Moses prayed for his own people, God granted his prayer for Muḥammad's *ummah* (nation, people). This is based on the assumption that the next verse—*those who follow the Messenger…* (7:157)—is a description and interpretation of *those who are Godwary…* (7:156). We shall discuss this below.

(2) God also granted the first chapter of Moses' prayer [in verse 7:155], because He does not say anything that implies its rejection. It is far from God to narrate some prayer in His Book that He has not granted, vainly and without any purpose. God's response in this verse—*Therefore I shall prescribe it for those…* (7:156)—corresponds to Moses' second prayer mentioned at the beginning of the current verse, where he asks continuous good for his people in this world and the hereafter. This response cannot be matched with Moses' first prayer [in the last verse], where he asks forgiveness for their sin of saying: *Show us Allah visibly* (4:153). Remaining silent in response to that prayer implies its acceptance and fulfillment, just as we see in other similar places in the Qur'an.

We can infer the acceptance and granting of his prayer for forgiveness from another verse that talks about the same story: *Then We raised you up after your death so that you might give thanks* (2:56). It is very unlikely

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This could be another implicit correction and qualification by God. It means: "While I accept your repentance to Me, you must maintain it in the future in order to qualify for My special mercy and be rewarded with goodness in this life and in the hereafter." (Trans.)

and unbelievable that God would bring them back to life without having forgiven the sin for which they were destroyed.

***… Therefore I shall prescribe it* (fa-sa-aktubuhā, from kitābah)…:** The pronoun "it" refers to *My mercy*. *Kitābah* (writing, prescription) is used metaphorically here. It conveys a definite decree, in the sense that when something is written, it is more established and solid.

… for those who are Godwary…: Those who abstain from what is forbidden, and are careful not to miss what is obligatory.

***… and give the alms* (al-zakāh)…:** This refers to obligatory financial dues, or any spending in the way of God. There are a few possible aspects for why such expenditure is called *zakāh* (a means of growth): (1) It causes one's wealth to grow. (2) It fixes social problems. (3) It removes the deficiencies of the society. Some exegetes have suggested that what is meant here is spiritual growth and self-purification. That is, fulfilling the *zakāh* is the same as improving one's moral traits. However, this view is implausible.

… and those who believe in Our signs: They are submissive to any sign or message that is from God. Some examples of these signs are: (1) The miracles of the prophets, such as the miracles of Moses, Jesus and Muḥammad. (2) Religious laws and commands, such as the legal codes brought by Moses and the other prophets. (3) The prophets themselves. (4) The signs which indicate the truth of the prophets, such as the signs of Prophet Muḥammad mentioned in the scriptures of Moses and Jesus. All of these are divine signs that the Israelites and others must believe in, submit to, and not reject.

We notice a transition from the first person plural in the last verse—*Moses chose seventy men [from] his people for Our tryst* (7:155)—to the first person singular here: *Said He, "I visit My punishment…* (7:156). This shows God's special care and attention for answering the prayer of His servants who call Him. He turns to them personally, without the involvement of anyone else, even as an intermediary. Speaking in the first person plural indicates the grand status of the speaker, since important individuals speak of themselves and their retinue in plural.[1] But if the same important person wants to show his special attention to the addressee or to the address, he would use the first person singular.

We see the same usage throughout the Qur'an. God uses the first

1 This is the majestic plural, called the "royal we." (Trans.)

person singular when narrating His answer to the intimate prayers and private conversations of His prophets and saints. Some examples are the supplications of Noah, Abraham, and Moses on his nocturnal tryst in Mount Ṭūr. The same goes with the prayers of other righteous servants, and God's granting of their wishes. He always uses the first person singular, unless He wants to convey some other point.

… and those who believe in Our signs: Here we see another shift back to the first person plural. The reason for this transition is to make a connection between this verse and the following verse, which is presented as an interpretation of this sentence: *and those who believe in Our signs*. As we shall discuss below, the next verse is rather a digression to a parenthetical remark, made in the middle of the current discussion. It does not share the same context as the current verse, which is a direct conversation and an intimate whisper between Moses and God. Instead, the next verse goes back to the previous context, where God was speaking in the first person plural.

Therefore, rather than saying, "those who believe in *My* signs," the verse says: *those who believe in Our signs*, in order to link the next verse to the previous thread in a very subtle way. This is an elegant literary usage in the Qur'an. The reader should reflect and ponder about it.

الَّذِينَ يَتَّبِعُونَ الرَّسُولَ النَّبِيَّ الْأُمِّيَّ الَّذِي يَجِدُونَهُ مَكْتُوبًا عِنْدَهُمْ فِي التَّوْرَاةِ وَالْإِنْجِيلِ يَأْمُرُهُمْ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَيَنْهَاهُمْ عَنِ الْمُنْكَرِ وَيُحِلُّ لَهُمُ الطَّيِّبَاتِ وَيُحَرِّمُ عَلَيْهِمُ الْخَبَائِثَ وَيَضَعُ عَنْهُمْ إِصْرَهُمْ وَالْأَغْلَالَ الَّتِي كَانَتْ عَلَيْهِمْ ۚ فَالَّذِينَ آمَنُوا بِهِ وَعَزَّرُوهُ وَنَصَرُوهُ وَاتَّبَعُوا النُّورَ الَّذِي أُنْزِلَ مَعَهُ ۙ أُولَٰئِكَ هُمُ الْمُفْلِحُونَ ﴿١٥٧﴾

(7:157) "***—those who follow the Messenger, the unschooled prophet, whose mention they find written with them in the Torah and the Gospel, who bids them to do what is right and forbids them from what is wrong, makes lawful to them all the good things and forbids them from all vicious things, and relieves them of their burdens*** **(iṣrahum)** ***and the shackles*** **(al-aghlāl)** ***that were upon them—so those who believe in him, honor him, and help him and follow the light that has been sent down with him, they are the felicitous.***"

Aghlāl is the plural of *ghull*, which is "a means of binding" [that is,

chains, shackles, fetters]. Al-Rāghib says in *al-Mufradāt*:

Iṣr is to tie something and confine it through domination. When one does so, one says: *aṣartuhu*. That which is tied and confined is called *maʾṣūr*. A ship's prison is called *maʾṣar* and *maʾṣir*. God says: *and he relieves them of their burdens* (7:157), meaning those things which were restraining them and holding them back from doing good and achieving rewards. Similarly, He says: *Place not upon us a burden* (2:286). Some have interpreted *iṣr* here as *thiql* (weight, load), but the correct view is what we said.[1]

—those who follow the Messenger, the unschooled prophet…: This verse lists eight characteristics for the Prophet Muḥammad:

(1) He is a messenger.
(2) He is unschooled.
(3) He is a prophet.
(4) He enjoins what is right.
(5) He forbids what is wrong.
(6) He legalizes good things.
(7) He bans foul things.
(8) He takes off the burdens and the shackles that were upon the previous nations.

Given the context and connection of the verses, this verse is apparently a description and interpretation of what we read at the end of the last verse: *those who believe in Our signs* (7:156). The apparent text of the verse confirms this, because it mentions that these eight qualities are indications of the last Prophet, and signs that were given the People of the Book in the Torah and the Gospel. One of the conditions that God set for them [in the last verse] was to believe in His signs. Part of that would be believing in the signs of Muḥammad's prophethood, which are found in their sources.

Question: We saw earlier [in the last verse] that God set two conditions for the Jews to qualify for His special mercy: Godwariness and belief. Meanwhile, it is certain, beyond any doubt, that God's special mercy was not restricted to those Jews who lived to see and believe in Muḥammad.

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1 This makes *iṣr* and *ghull* synonymous. Either way, both are used metaphorically here, which reduces the significance of their precise distinction. (Trans.)

What about the other righteous Israelites from the time of Prophet Moses to the time of Prophet Muḥammad? We should not even imagine the possibility that they are disqualified from God's promised mercy. After all, only a very small fraction of Jews believed in Muḥammad [when he made his call]. There were multitudes of believers between Moses and Jesus, and after Jesus, who accepted the divine call of their prophets. God accepted their belief and promised them good. The Qur'an attests to this. So how could divine mercy, which covered all Children of Israel, be limited to a small group of them who believed in the Prophet Muḥammad?

Answer: It is true that the qualities mentioned here—*those who follow the Messenger, the unschooled prophet…* (7:157)—are descriptive and interpretive of the last part of the previous verse—*those who believe in Our signs* (7:156)—but the interpretation and what is interpreted are not equal in terms of inclusion and universality. Rather, the interpretation is a *subdivision* of the entire group, which is specifically derived, highlighted, and pointed out for a certain purpose. In the current discussion, the purpose is to describe and clarify the truth of Prophet Muḥammad's mission, and the reason why the People of the Book must respond to it and accept it.

There are other examples of this in the Qur'an, where the description and what is described are at different levels of inclusion and breadth. For instance, in one place God narrates from Iblīs: *By Your might, I will surely pervert them* (38:82). Elsewhere, God narrates a more specific and restricted from of this from him: *and I will lead them astray and give them [false] hopes, and prompt them to slit the ears of cattle, and I will prompt them to alter Allah's creation* (4:119). The second verse is derived and extracted from the general expression of the first verse.

We saw another example of this at the beginning of the current sūrah, from verse 7:11 (*Certainly We created you, then We formed you…*) to verse 7:35 (*O Children of Adam! If there come to you messengers from among yourselves…*). As we explained, that is an example of deriving one address from another one, for the purpose of generalization.[1] There are other similar cases to this in the Qur'an.

Therefore, what is mentioned in this verse—*those who follow the Messenger* (7:157)—is descriptive and interpretive of the last verse in the

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1 See the author's "Introduction" to verses 7:26-36, and his exposition of verse 7:32; volume 15, pp. 95-96 and 114 of the English translation. (Trans.)

sense that it extracts a specific description from a more general one, and applies it to what is required by the context. It is as though the verse is saying: As We said, God prescribed His mercy for those Children of Israel *who are Godwary and give the alms and those who believe in Our signs* (7:156). Now, the application of that today—when Muḥammad has announced his mission—would be those Children of Israel who follow Muḥammad. They would be the ones who are Godwary and pay the alms, and those who believe in Our signs. They have believed in Our signs, meaning Moses, Jesus and Muḥammad. They have believed in Our signs, meaning the miracles of these messengers, and the laws and obligations which were revealed to them. They have believed in Our signs, meaning the indications that We have provided for them in the Torah and the Gospel for Muḥammad's prophethood, appearance and mission.

those who follow the Messenger, the unschooled prophet…: The verb "follow" (*yattabiʿūna*) is a descriptive substitute for the verb "believe" (*yuʾminūna*) at the end of the last verse. This is a remarkable expression, because real belief in the signs of God—like His prophets and laws—can only be through submission and obedience. Choosing the verb "follow" [as a replacement for "believe"] shows that it is not sufficient for one to merely adopt some belief, alone and abstracted from action. If one does not obey and submit to God's signs in practice, that is tantamount to their denial and rejection, even if the person accepts them to be true.

… the Messenger, the unschooled prophet…: This verse and the next are the only verses in the Qur'an where the Prophet Muḥammad is described with these three qualities together.

… whose mention they find written with them in the Torah and the Gospel…: This shows that the Prophet was described and known with the above mentioned three qualities in the Torah and the Gospel. The purpose of stating these three qualities is to introduce the Prophet in a way that the People of the Book would recognize based on his descriptions in their books. Otherwise, there was no reason to describe the Prophet with these three qualities, especially the last one [unschooled].

… who bids them to do what is right and forbids them from what is wrong, makes lawful to them all the good things and forbids them from all vicious things, and relieves them of their burdens and the shackles that were upon them…: Just like the first three qualities at the beginning of the verse, these five qualities are also part of the Prophet's signs which are to

be found in the Torah and the Gospel.

These qualities are among the exclusive traits of the Prophet Muḥammad and his bright religion, although some share of them certainly existed in the previous religions and their righteous followers. They too used to enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong, as the Qur'an says concerning some People of the Book: *Yet they are not all alike. Among the People of the Book is an upright nation… and bid what is right and forbid what is wrong, and are active in [performing] good deeds* (3:113-114). Similarly, legalizing the good things and banning foul things are fundamentally intuitive ordinances (*fiṭriyyāt*) which are common to all divine religions, as God says: *Say, "Who has forbidden the adornment of Allah which He has brought forth for His servants, and the good things of [His] provision?"* (7:32).

Likewise, the law that Prophet Jesus brought included some element of laying down the burdens and fetters, as God narrates from him in the Qur'an: *And [I come] to confirm [the truth of] that which is before me of the Torah, and to make lawful for you some of the things that were forbidden you* (3:50). There is also some allusion to this in his address to the Children of Israel: *[I have come] to make clear to you some of the things that you differ about* (43:63).

Despite the above, the one religion which blew a full spirit of life into the bodies of enjoining good and forbidding evil was Islam. It raised these precepts from merely being some values to the degree of holy combat (jihad) in the way of God with one's possessions and life. Similarly, Islam is the only religion which takes in its scope every aspect of human life and every element of human behavior, and classifies them into fair things which are lawful, and foul things which are unlawful. No other religious law nor any social code of law parallels Islam in terms of its comprehensiveness and elaboration. Likewise, Islam is the one religion which abrogated all difficult obligations which were laid upon the People of the Book—particularly the Jews—as well as what their scholars had taken up [as obligatory], and what their priests and monks had innovated. All these culminated in the religion which Muḥammad brought, with a book from God that confirms the divine books before it. This is something that no skeptic can doubt.

The perfection of these five qualities is exclusively found in Islam, although some stages of them are also found in other religions. This itself

is the best evidence for the truthfulness of the Prophet who proclaimed this religion. That is even if there were no mention of these signs in the Torah and the Gospel, because the Prophet's religion is a perfection of the religions of Moses and Jesus. After all, what is expected of a true religion? Are the criteria for a true religion anything other than these five qualities: (1) to recognize what is right; (2) to deny what is wrong; (3) to legalize the good things; (4) to ban foul things; and (5) to abolish all burdens and shackles? These are an elaboration of the truth which of all divine religions propagate. Hence, the followers of the Torah and the Gospel must acknowledge that a religion which incorporates the perfection of all these matters in detail is exactly their own religion in its perfect stage.

What we just said means that the five descriptions given in this verse—*who bids them to do what is right and forbids them from what is wrong…* (7:157)—together amount to the fact that the Prophet confirms the divine laws and teachings in the Torah and the Gospel. It is equivalent to saying, "He confirms what was before him," much like what we read elsewhere in the Qur'an: *And when there came to them a messenger from Allah, confirming that which is with them, a part of those who were given the Book cast the Book of Allah behind their back, as if they did not know [that it is Allah's Book]* (2:101); *And when there came to them a Book from Allah, confirming that which is with them—and earlier they would pray for victory over the pagans—so when there came to them what they recognized, they defied it. So may the curse of Allah be on the faithless* (2:89). These verses say that the Prophet has brought the perfection of the laws that are found in their scriptures, yet they deny him despite knowing that he is mentioned in their books and was promised by their prophets. Thus God narrates from the Messiah: *O Children of Israel! Indeed I am the messenger of Allah to you, to confirm what is before me of the Torah, and to give the good news of a messenger who will come after me, whose name is Aḥmad* (61:6). We shall discuss the promises of Prophet Muḥammad in their sacred books to the extent possible, if God wills.

In this verse, instead of saying, "he confirms what was before him" [like the other verses in the Qur'an], it says: *he bids them to do what is right…* (7:157). The reason for this expression is that the verse's audience is not limited to the People of the Book, but includes all people. That is why in the next verse, God orders the Prophet to address everyone: *Say, "O humankind! I am the Messenger of Allah to you all"* (7:158). Similarly, at

the end of the current verse He says in general terms: *so those who believe in him*, without confining it to the People of the Book.

… so those who believe in him, honor him* (ʿazzarūhu, from taʿzīr), *and help him and follow the light that has been sent down with him, they are the felicitous": *Taʿzīr* means "supporting someone with honor and respect." *The light that has been sent down with him* refers to the Qur'an. It is described as "light" to indicate that it illuminates the way of life, and lights the path that one must pursue to reach the abode of happiness and perfection. After all, this is the central theme of the verse.

***… that has been sent down with him* (unzila maʿahū)…:** The verb *unzila* (sent down, descended) is normally used with the preposition *ʿalá* (on, upon, over) or *ilá* (to, toward), but here the verse uses *maʿa* (with). This usage indicates accompaniment and concomitance. This is an indirect reference to the Qur'an's function as a sign and evidence for the Prophet's truth. The effective meaning is: "Follow the light which has been sent upon him. Since this light includes and manifests the perfection of the previous religions, it is evidence for his truthfulness. This light shows that he is the one who was promised by their prophets, and was mentioned in their books." Therefore, *maʿahu* (with him) functions as *ḥāl* (circumstantial qualifier, participial phrase), describing the condition of the implicit subject of the passive verb *unzila* (has been sent down).[1] A similar usage to this can be found in the verse: *then Allah sent the prophets as bearers of good news and as warners, and He sent down with them the Book with the truth, that it may judge between the people concerning that about which they differed* (2:213).

Here is what some exegetes have said about the usage and meaning of the preposition *maʿa* (with) here:

(1) The pronoun "it" (or "him") in *maʿahu* (with it, with him) indicates something that has been sent down in addition to the Qur'an and with it. That is not the Prophet, but it is his mission or prophethood, which is omitted and implied in the verse. Otherwise, the

1 *Ḥāl* always implies the meaning of "while." The meaning here is: "Those who follow the light which has been sent down while it is with him." The Prophet's evidence for the truth of his mission is that the Qur'an has been sent in his company. The verse conveys this point most succinctly by using the preposition *maʿa* (with) instead of *ʿalá* (on, upon, over) or *ilá* (to, toward). (Trans.)

Qur'an was not sent with the Prophet, but with Gabriel.[1]

(2) The pronoun "him" in *maʿahu* (with him) refers back to the verb "follow" (*ittabaʿū*). The meaning is: "Those who follow the Qur'an in addition to following him [the Prophet]."

(3) *Maʿahu* (with him) functions as *ḥāl* (circumstantial qualifier, participial phrase), describing the condition of the implicit subject of the verb "follow" (*ittabaʿū*). The meaning is: "Those who follow the Qur'an while the Prophet also follows the Qur'an with them."

(4) The preposition *maʿa* here means *ʿalá* (on, upon, over).

(5) The preposition *maʿa* here means *ʿind* (at, near, before).

The implausibility of all these views should be clear.

… so those who believe in him, honor him, and help him and follow the light…: This is an interpretation and elaboration of the first part of the verse: *those who follow the Messenger…* It shows that true followership of the Prophet is to follow the Book of God, which includes His laws and teachings. The part of following that pertains to the Prophet is to believe in his prophetic mission, to not deny him, to honor him through submission, to and support him in what he resolves to do during his life.

… so those who* (fa-alladhīna) *believe in him…: The letter *fāʾ* (therefore, so, then) here indicates that this final part of the verse is a conclusion that is drawn from the first part of the verse: *those who follow the Messenger…* (7:157). As we said, this entire verse is a specific description that is extracted from a general criterion at the end of the last verse: *those who believe in Our signs* (7:156). The meaning is: When Moses asked Me to embrace the Children of Israel in My mercy, and to prescribe the good of this world and the next for them, I accepted his request with a few conditions. One of them was that they should believe in Our signs. An application of believing in Our signs at this time [with the appearance of Prophet Muḥammad] is to follow Our Messenger who has these qualities [mentioned in this verse]. Therefore it follows as a conclusion[2] that *those who believe in him*—and have the rest of the mentioned qualities—*they are the felicitous*.

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1 The meaning would be: "Those who follow the light that has been sent down together with his prophethood." (Trans.)

2 The author's sole objective in the current paragraph is to precisely explain the usage of the letter *fāʾ* as an indicator of consequence and conclusion. (Trans.)

قُلْ يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنِّي رَسُولُ اللَّهِ إِلَيْكُمْ جَمِيعًا الَّذِي لَهُ مُلْكُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ ۖ لَا إِلَٰهَ إِلَّا هُوَ يُحْيِي وَيُمِيتُ ۖ فَآمِنُوا بِاللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِ النَّبِيِّ الْأُمِّيِّ الَّذِي يُؤْمِنُ بِاللَّهِ وَكَلِمَاتِهِ وَاتَّبِعُوهُ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَهْتَدُونَ ﴿١٥٨﴾

(7:158) ***Say: O humankind! I am the Messenger of Allah to you all, [of Him] to Whom belongs the kingdom of the heavens and the earth. There is no god except Him. He gives life and brings death. So have faith in Allah and His Messenger, the unschooled prophet, who has faith in Allah and His words, and follow him so that you may be guided.***

This verse follows directly from the last. The previous verse elucidated the qualities of the Prophet, which constitute a perfect religion, and which provide the people with a good life in any time or place that they may be. These are what the people need the most in order to lead a truly happy life: (1) to be enjoined to what is right; (2) to be forbidden what is wrong; (3) to have good things made lawful for them; (4) to have foul things made unlawful for them; (5) to have their burdens and shackles removed from them. Having these qualities established for the Prophet, he is now ordered to announce his mission to all humankind, without restricting it to any particular community: *Say, "O humankind! I am the Messenger of Allah to you all."*

… to Whom belongs the kingdom of the heavens and the earth. There is no god except Him. He gives life and brings death…: These descriptions of God together serve to justify two things: (1) the possibility of Muḥammad being chosen and sent by God as a divine messenger; (2) the possibility of him being sent with a universal mission that applies to all humankind. The Children of Israel were reluctant to accept a prophet being sent to them from another nation, particularly from among the unschooled Arabs. However, they are part of God's nation [like all human beings]. Moreover, they presumed to bear no duty toward the gentiles, and considered themselves to be the chosen people of God, His children, and His loved ones.[1] Similarly, due to bigotry, some non-Arabs were extremely suspicious of an Arab prophet being sent to them. These descriptions serve to remove all such prejudice. The verse's justification can be elaborated as follows:

1 See verses 3:75 and 5:18. (Trans.)

(1) God, Who has appointed Muḥammad as His Messenger, is One *to Whom belongs the kingdom of the heavens and the earth*. He has absolute dominion over the entire universe.

(2) *There is no god except Him*. There is no one beside Him who possesses anything in existence. Therefore, He can rule over His kingdom as He wills, without anyone holding Him back from that, or anyone's will interfering with His. Hence, it is up to Him to send a messenger toward His servants. Similarly, He has the right and authority to send a messenger either to some of His servants, or to all of them, as He sees fit.

(3) *He gives life and brings death*. He can give a genuinely happy and felicitous life to some or all of the people. Happiness and guidance are part and parcel of [true] life, just as wretchedness and error are tantamount to [real] death. God says: *O you who have faith! Answer Allah and the Messenger when he summons you to that which will give you life* (8:24); *Is he who was lifeless, then We gave him life and provided him with a light by which he walks among the people* (6:122); *Only those who listen will respond [to you]. As for the dead, Allah will resurrect them* (6:36).

… So have faith in Allah and His Messenger, the unschooled prophet, who has faith in Allah and His words, and follow him so that you may be guided": The context suggests that this is a continuation of the first part of the verse, where the Prophet is given a speech to address to the people. Therefore, according to the theme of the verse, there is a shift from the first person to the third person here: *and His Messenger, the unschooled prophet, who…* Instead of using first person pronouns, the Prophet is ordered to refer to himself with these qualities—in the third person—because these qualities serve as a justification and reason for the injunctions that are drawn as a conclusion: *So have faith* and *follow him so that you may be guided*.

In other words, the point of making this transition can be inferred from the letter *fā*ʾ (so, therefore, then) at the beginning of this segment, which shows that what is said here is a conclusion drawn from the previous parts. The Prophet is ordered to conclude: Given the above points, you must believe in me, for indeed I am the above mentioned *Messenger, the unschooled prophet*, who was promised in the Torah and the Gospel. I believe in God and do not deny Him [or am not ungrateful to Him].

I believe in *His words*, which include all the laws and teachings that He sent to me and to the previous prophets. You must follow me *so that you may be guided*.

"Guidance" here is offered as a result and consequence of: (1) having faith in God and His Messenger; and (2) following the Messenger. This shows that guidance here means being guided to happiness in the hereafter, which consists of paradise and God's satisfaction. It does not mean being guided to the right path, because that is no different from the two conditions—of faith and following—which were just ordered. Hence, the result mentioned here—*so that you may be guided*—boils down to the same result mentioned at the end of the last verse: *they are the felicitous* (7:157).

وَمِنْ قَوْمِ مُوسَىٰ أُمَّةٌ يَهْدُونَ بِالْحَقِّ وَبِهِ يَعْدِلُونَ ﴿١٥٩﴾

(7:159) ***Among the people of Moses is a nation who guide [the people] by the truth* (bil-ḥaqq) *and do justice thereby.***

This verse shows the fairness of the Qur'an, as it praises those who deserve praise, and applauds their good deeds after rebuking their sins. It says that the Jews are not all the same. Not all of them disobey God and His messenger. Not all of them subscribe to error and wrong. There is a community of them that guide others to the truth and treat each other with justice. The letter *bā'* (by, with) in *bil-ḥaqq* indicates instrumentation (*ālah*).[1] It can also indicate coverage (*mulābasah*).[2]

This verse ascribes the act of guidance to someone other than God, the prophets, and the religious leaders (Imams). There is another similar verse which narrates from the believer from Pharaoh's family: *And he who had faith said: O my people! Follow me, I will guide you to the way of rectitude* (40:38). It is likely that "a nation among the people of Moses" refers to the prophets and religious leaders that came after Moses. This is how God has described them in other verses, such as: *And amongst them We appointed imams to guide [the people] by Our command, when they had been patient and had conviction in Our signs* (32:24).[3] The thing is that the real meaning of "guidance to the truth" and "judgment by the

1 The meaning would be: "They guide by means of the truth." (Trans.)

2 The meaning would be: "Their guidance is covered with the truth." (Trans.)

3 Also see verse 21:73, which the author has referenced and discussed under verse 2:124. (Trans.)

truth"—as mentioned in this verse, *guide [the people] by the truth and do justice thereby*—is something that only a divine prophet or leader (Imam) can perform. We have already discussed the meaning of guidance under other verses such as: *He said: I am making you an imam for humankind* (2:124) and: *Whomever Allah desires to guide, He opens his breast* (6:125).[1]

وَقَطَّعْنَاهُمُ اثْنَتَيْ عَشْرَةَ أَسْبَاطًا أُمَمًا ۚ وَأَوْحَيْنَا إِلَىٰ مُوسَىٰ إِذِ اسْتَسْقَاهُ قَوْمُهُ أَنِ
اضْرِبْ بِعَصَاكَ الْحَجَرَ ۖ فَانْبَجَسَتْ مِنْهُ اثْنَتَا عَشْرَةَ عَيْنًا ۖ قَدْ عَلِمَ كُلُّ أُنَاسٍ
مَشْرَبَهُمْ ۚ وَظَلَّلْنَا عَلَيْهِمُ الْغَمَامَ وَأَنْزَلْنَا عَلَيْهِمُ الْمَنَّ وَالسَّلْوَىٰ ۖ كُلُوا مِنْ طَيِّبَاتِ
مَا رَزَقْنَاكُمْ ۚ وَمَا ظَلَمُونَا وَلَٰكِنْ كَانُوا أَنْفُسَهُمْ يَظْلِمُونَ ﴿١٦٠﴾

(7:160) ***We split them up into twelve tribal* (asbāṭan) *communities, and We revealed to Moses, when his people asked him for water, [saying], "Strike the rock with your staff," whereat twelve fountains gushed forth from it. Every tribe came to know its drinking-place. And We shaded them with clouds, and We sent down to them manna and quails: "Eat of the good things We have provided you." And they did not wrong Us, but they used to wrong [only] themselves.***

According to the lexicons, *sibṭ* means "grandchild," whether through a son or a daughter. Its plural is *asbāṭ*. When used for the Children of Israel, however, it has a more specific meaning: it is equivalent to *qabīlah* (tribe, clan) among the Arabs.

Ibn al-Ḥājib has argued that since plural in Arabic consists of at least three members, *asbāṭan* in this verse would amount to 36 tribes or more [which is certainly not what is intended]. Hence, the verse implies an omission: "We split them up into twelve *a sect*; that is, tribes." *Asbāṭan* here functions as a *badal* (substitute, replacement) for "twelve" not as a *tamyīz* (specification, discrimination, clarification) for it [because *tamyīz* must be singular in Arabic]. The *tamyīz* for "twelve" is the implicit *firqah* (sect, faction, branch). Others have said that *asbāṭān* can function as *tamyīz* for twelve because it implies a singular meaning. It is equivalent to a word like *jamāʿah* (group, cluster, bunch) [which is a collective noun

1 See volume 2 (1st ed.), pp. 78ff, and volume 14, pp. 152ff of the English translation. (Trans.)

(sing. *ism-i jam*ᶜ), but singular in construct].

… whereat twelve fountains gushed forth* (inbajasat, from inbijās) *from it…: *Inbijās* is synonymous with *infijār* (eruption, explosion, burst).[1] It is also said that *inbijās* is used when water flows out softly at a slow rate, while *infijār* is used when it flows out abundantly at a rapid rate.[2]

… whereat twelve fountains gushed forth from it. Every tribe came to know its drinking-place…: This suggests that there were as many springs as the tribes, and each spring was assigned to a certain tribe. This was apparently done due to of some rivalry and dispute among them, as confirmed by the narrations concerning the story. The rest of the meaning should be clear.

In the verses that we have read so far in this chapter [and will read below], God has mentioned a number of miracles and signs of Moses, including:

(1) The python [7:107 and 7:117].
(2) The white hand [7:108].
(3) The drought and loss of fruits which afflicted Pharaoh's clan [7:130].
(4) The flood [7:133].
(5) The locusts [7:133].
(6) The lice [7:133].
(7) The frogs [7:133].
(8) The blood [7:133].
(9) The splitting of the sea [7:136-138].
(10) The killing and resurrecting of the seventy elite [7:155].
(11) The emergence of fountains from the rock by a strike of the staff [7:160].
(12) Being shaded with clouds [7:160].
(13) The sending of manna and quails [7:160].
(14) The plucking of the mountain above them like a canopy [7:171].
(15) Perhaps one can also add the following to the list:
(16) Speaking to God [7:143].

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1 Therefore, the current verse and verse 2:60 present the same scene using two synonymous verbs. (Trans.)

2 Based on this, the current verse refers the onset of the flow, and verse 2:60 describes its subsequent profusion. (Trans.)

(17) The revelation of the Torah [that is, the Tablets; 7:145].

(18) The transfiguration of some of them to spurned apes [7:166].

We shall discuss his story in further detail in our exposition of Sūrah Hūd.[1]

Examining Narrations

(1) Al-Ḥārith b. al-Mughīrah says: I said to Imam al-Ṣādiq, "In the illness which led to his death, ʿAbd-Allāh b. ʿAjlān claimed, 'I will not die [from this illness],' but he died." The Imam said, "May God not forgive any of his sins. What was he thinking? Moses chose seventy men from his people. When the quake seized them, he said, 'My Lord! [Save] my companions! [Save] my companions!' God told him, 'I will replace them by those who are better than them.' Moses said, 'I knew them and was accustomed to them.' Then God resurrected them as prophets for him [in their stead]."[2]

Author's comment: What the Imam means here is that God will substitute better companions for him in the place of ʿAbd-Allāh b. ʿAjlān, just as he did for Moses. This is an odd narration on this topic, and does not match the apparent meaning of the Qur'an.

(2) Saʿd b. ʿAbd-Allāh al-Qummī says: I asked Imam al-Mahdī, "Tell me, my master, why are the people not allowed to choose their own Imam?"

He inquired, "A righteous one or a corrupt one?"

"A righteous one, of course."

He asked, "Given that no one knows what thoughts occur to others—whether good or evil—is it possible that they choose a corrupt leader?"

"Yes," I confirmed.

"That is the reason," he explained. "I will give you an argument that stands to your reason. Tell me about God's messengers like Moses and Jesus. God has chosen them, has sent a scripture to them, and has supported them with revelation and infallibility. They can make a much more accurate choice since they are the

1 The author's discussion is in Sūrah al-Qaṣaṣ, under verses 28:29-42. (Trans.)

2 *Tafsīr al-ʿAyyāshī*.

cream of the crop.[1] If they are given the choice, is it possible that they, despite perfect degree of reason and knowledge, would choose a hypocrite, thinking that the person is a believer?"

"Never," I replied.

"Well, there we have Moses, God's Interlocutor, with abundant reason, perfect knowledge, and receiving revelation. He chose seventy men from the elite of his people and the chiefs of his army. He had no doubt in their īmān (belief, faith) and *ikhlāṣ* (sincerity, purity). Nevertheless, his chosen ones turned out to be hypocrites. God says: *Moses chose seventy men [from] his people for Our tryst* (7:155), up to where He says [narrating from them]: *"We will not believe you until we see Allah visibly"* (2:55), *whereat a thunderbolt seized them for their wrongdoing* (4:153). This is someone who was chosen by God as a prophet. He selected the corrupt ones instead of the righteous ones, even though he believed that he was picking the righteous ones, not the corrupt ones. This should make us realize that the selection [of religious leaders] is an exclusive prerogative of the One Who knows what the breasts hide, what the souls conceal, and what the secrets hold. When the selection of the prophets turns out to be corrupt—while they were aiming for the good—it leaves no weight for the selection of the Muhājirīn (Meccan Immigrants) and the Anṣār (Medinan Supporters)."[2]

Author's comment: In this hadith, the verse is paraphrased, in the sense that the Imam has combined the verses of the story from Sūrah al-Aʿrāf and Sūrah al-Nisāʾ.[3]

(3) Nūf al-Ḥimyarī said: When Moses chose seventy men from his

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1 The two published editions of *Tafsīr al-burhān* say: *aʿlām al-umam* (emblems or leaders of the nations). That seems to be a transcription error. The original was perhaps: *aʿlam al-umam* (the most knowledgeable of their nations). (Auth.)

2 *Tafsīr al-burhān*, on the authority of Ibn Bābawayh, via its chain of narration, as a part of a longer hadith.

3 Apparently the quote from Sūrah al-Baqarah was also meant to be from Sūrah al-Nisāʾ: for they said, *"Show us Allah visibly," whereat a thunderbolt seized them…* (4:153). This mistake could possibly have occurred in transmission or transcription. (Trans.)

people for his Lord's tryst, God said to Moses, "I shall make the earth for you a place of worship and pure [or purifier]. I shall place the tranquility with you in your homes. I shall make you recite the Torah from your hearts, such that all of you can read it, whether man or woman, free or slave, young or old."

Moses told them, "Indeed God has made the earth a place of worship and pure for you." They retorted, "We want to worship only in the synagogues."

He told them, "He shall place the tranquility[1] with you in your homes." They retorted, "We rather have it in the Ark, as it was."

He told them, "He shall make you recite the Torah from your hearts, such that all of you can read it, whether man or woman, free or slave, young or old." They retorted, "We want to always read it from the text."

Then God revealed to him: *Therefore I shall prescribe it for those who are Godwary and give the alms… the felicitous* (7:156-157).

Moses said [to God], "I came to You with a delegation of my people, but You are bestowing the reward of their visit on others. So place me among that nation [as their prophet]." God replied, "Their prophet shall be one of themselves."

Moses said, "Place me among that nation [as one of their members]." God replied, "You will not live to be part of them."

Moses repeated, "My Lord! I came to You with a delegation of my people, but You are bestowing the reward of their visit on others."

So God revealed to him: *Among the people of Moses is a nation who guide [the people] by the truth and do justice thereby* (7:159).

Thus Moses was satisfied.

Nūf then added: Would you not thank your Lord Who was there [on your behalf] when you were absent, Who took your share [on your behalf], and Who bestowed the reward of the visit of others on you?[2]

Nūf al-Bikālī said: When Moses chose seventy men of his people, he told them, "Now you get to proceed toward God and ask Him a request." Moses had one wish [that would be granted] and they

1 This refers to a special and miraculous tranquility, as mentioned in verse 2:248. (Trans.)

2 *Al-Durr al-manthūr*, on the authority of Ibn Abī Ḥātim and Abū al-Shaykh.

had one. When they reached Mount Ṭūr, the place where God had appointed for Moses, he told them, "Now ask God [whatever you want]." They said: *Show us Allah visibly* (4:153).
Moses told them, "Shame on you! Are you requesting this again?" They retorted, "This is what we want! *Show us Allah visibly* (4:153)." Thus the quake seized them and they swooned dead.
Moses said [to God]: "My Lord! I came to you with seventy from the best of the Children of Israel. Now should I return to them without any of them? Then how should I deal with the Children of Israel? Will they not kill me?" God replied, "Make your request." He prayed, "My Lord! I ask You to resurrect them." And God resurrected them. Thus their wish and his wish were squandered, but that [granted] wish is assigned to this nation [of Muslims].[1]

Author's comment: We quoted the last two accounts because they are representative of the other narrations on this story. The chain of these narrations ends with the Prophet's Companions (called *mawqūf*). Despite their differences, the way these two narrations have depicted the story and embedded the Qur'anic verses does not match the apparent meaning of the verses whatsoever. Here is the Qur'anic view: (1) They demanded to see God, which was rejected. (2) Moses requested two things: (i) He prayed for their resurrection, which was granted, and they were brought back to life. (ii) He prayed that God would prescribe His mercy for the Children of Israel, which was granted on the condition of Godwariness and belief in the signs of God. (3) Nothing of the reward of their visit was diverted to other nations [according to the Qur'an]. (4) The verse, *Among the people of Moses is a nation who guide [the people] by the truth and do justice thereby* (7:159) is addressed to the Prophet Muḥammad, not to Moses, as per the context.

(4) Concerning *And prescribe goodness for us in this world and the Hereafter* (7:156) Ibn ʿAbbās said: God did not grant this to Moses. *Said He, "I visit My punishment on whomever I will… the felicitous."* (7:156-157).[2]

Author's comment: This means that God did not give it to Moses,

1 *Al-Durr al-manthūr*, on the authority of Ibn Abī Ḥātim and Abū al-Shaykh.

2 *Al-Durr al-manthūr*.

but his wish was granted for this nation [of Muslims]. As we said [under the verses' exposition and the last comment], the apparent meaning of the verse is otherwise. Similar to the last two accounts, this narration is incompatible with the Qur'anic verses.

(5) Concerning *This is only Your trial…* (7:155) al-Suddī said: Moses asked God, "My Lord! The Samaritan (al-Sāmirī) ordered them to make a calf. But what about the spirit in it? Who blew that in it?"
"I did," God admitted.
Moses concluded, "So You are the One Who led them astray, my Lord."[1]
Imams al-Bāqir and al-Ṣādiq said: Moses inquired, "My Lord, who made the calf give a lowing sound?"
"I did," God admitted.
Thus Moses said: *This is only Your trial by which You lead astray whomever You will and guide whomever You will* (7:155).[2]

Author's comment: The last two accounts, which are similar to one another, are also incompatible with the Qur'an. The problem with them is that in the verse, Moses makes this statement—*This is only Your trial* (7:155)—when the seventy elite fell dead. That was a completely separate event from the story of the calf—unless one says that Moses repeated this on two occasions.

(6) Once a desert Arab came [to Medina], alighted from his camel, and tied it. After praying behind the Messenger of God he cried, "O God, show mercy to me and Muḥammad, and do not associate anyone else in our mercy!" The Messenger of God said, "You have certainly suppressed an extensive mercy. God created a hundred shares of mercy. He sent one share [to this world], by which all creatures show affection to one another, including the jinn, the humans and the animals. The other 99 are with Him [reserved for the hereafter]."[3]
The Prophet said: God has a hundred shares of mercy. One of them is the mercy by which the creatures show affection to each

1 *Al-Durr al-manthūr*.

2 *Tafsīr al-ʿAyyāshī*, via an incomplete chain of transmission (*mursal*).

3 *Al-Durr al-manthūr*, on the authority of Aḥmad and Abū Dāwūd, on the authority of Jundab b. ʿAbd-Allāh al-Bajallī.

other, and by which the animals look after their offspring. He has left the other 99 shares for the Day of Resurrection.[1]

The Prophet said: "God created a hundred shares of mercy the day He created the heavens and the earth. Each of them is as vast as the distance between the heaven and the earth. He sent a single share of that to the earth. It is with that share that the creatures show mercy to each other, a mother shows kindness to her child, the birds and animals drink water, and all creatures live. Upon the Day of Resurrection, He will take that away from His creatures, and will then shower it upon the Godwary in addition to the other 99 shares of mercy." Then he recited: *But My mercy embraces all things. Therefore I shall prescribe it for those who are Godwary* (7:156).[2]

Author's comment: The idea seen in the last three narrations is also narrated through Shia chains of transmission from the Imams of Ahl al-Bayt. The last hadith [number 10] is apparently a paraphrase of the one before it [number 9]. The transmitter has ruined the meaning by adding: "Upon the Day of Resurrection, He will take that away from His creatures." If mercy is taken away from everyone except the Godwary, then how can one explain the life and subsistence of the heavens, the earth, the angels, paradise, hell, all their inhabitants, and other beings? How can they continue to exist while being deprived of God's [general] mercy?

A better expression is found in some Shia narrations. Relying on my memory, they say: "God will gather all hundred shares of mercy for the believers." Gathering and bestowing that upon the believers is not the same as taking it *away* from others and assigning it *exclusively* to the believers. The former is logically possible, as opposed to the latter. The reader should reflect on this.

(7) The Prophet said: By the One in Whose hand is my life, God will certainly forgive so much on the Day of Resurrection that even Iblīs will raise his hopes that His forgiveness may reach him as

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1 *Al-Durr al-manthūr*, on the authority of Aḥmad and Muslim, on the authority of Salmān.

2 *Al-Durr al-manthūr*, on the authority of Ibn Mardawayh, on the authority of Salmān. It is also narrated on the authority of Ibn Abī Shaybah, on the authority of Salmān, without connecting to the Prophet (*mawqūf*).

well.[1]

Author's comment: There are also some Shia narrations from the Imams of Ahl al-Bayt to this effect.

(8) Abū Bakr al-Hudhalī said: When God revealed, *My mercy embraces all things* (7:156), Iblīs said, "My Lord, I am also a thing!" Then God revealed: *Therefore I shall prescribe it for those who are Godwary* (7:156).[2]

Author's comment: Apparently this conversation is something that Abū Bakr thought must have been implied. Otherwise, the first statement is about God's universal mercy, which undoubtedly applies to Iblīs as well, while the second statement is about God's particular mercy in the hereafter, which certainly does not cover him.[3]

(9) Once the Prophet said, "The *īmān* (faith, belief) of which of God's creatures is the most marvellous?"[4]

The Companions replied, "The angels."

"The angels are with God [in the divine presence]," the Prophet explained, "so why shouldn't they believe?"

They replied, "The prophets."

"The prophets receive revelation. So why shouldn't they believe?"

They replied, "Us."

"I am amongst you. So why shouldn't you believe? Rather, there will be a people after you who will [only] find a text written on paper, and they will believe in it. This is the meaning of the verse: *those who follow the light that has been sent down with him, they are the felicitous* (7:157)."[5]

Author's comment: We can accept this narration as an example of

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1 *Al-Durr al-manthūr*, on the authority of al-Ṭabarānī, on the authority of Ḥudhayfat b. al-Yamān.

2 *Al-Durr al-manthūr*, on the authority of Ibn Abī Ḥātim and Abū al-Shaykh.

3 That is, in order for the verse to have an acceptable meaning, Abū Bakr al-Hudhalī has suggested this hypothetical conversation, as a way of complementing the verse's meaning, and in order to avoid any misinterpretation. According to the author, however, the objection is not applicable in the first place. Either way, it is not a Prophetic narration. (Trans.)

4 That is, "amazing, impressive, and admirably extraordinary." (Trans.)

5 *Tafsīr al-burhān*, on the authority of *Nahj al-bayān*.

matching and applying the verse to a different context (*jary wa inṭibāq*). Likewise, there are some narrations which interpret "light" in verse 5:157 as Imam ʿAlī. That is also an example of extending the verse to other contexts (*jary*) or an inner layer of the verse's meaning (*bāṭin*).

(10) ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib said: The Children of Israel divided into 71 sects after Moses. All of them are in hell save one. The Christians divided into 72 sects after Jesus. All of them are in hell save one. And this nation shall divide into 73 sects. All of them will be in hell save one. Concerning the Jews God says: *Among the people of Moses is a nation who guide [the people] by the truth and do justice thereby* (7:159); and concerning the Christians God says: *There is an upright group among them* (5:66). These are the sects that will be saved. As with us, He says: *Among those We have created are a nation who guide by the truth and do justice thereby* (7:181). They are the ones whom will be saved from this nation.[1]

(11) Once Imam ʿAlī called Raʾs al-Jālūt[2] and the archbishop of the Christians. He told them, "I want to ask you something that I know better than you, so do not hide it from me. O Raʾs al-Jālūt, I ask you by the One Who sent the Torah upon Moses, the One Who fed you manna and quails, the One Who opened a dry path for you in the sea, the One Who burst twelve springs for you from the rock in Mount Ṭūr—one spring for each tribe of the Children of Israel. Tell me: how many sects did the Children of Israel divide into after Moses?"

He replied, "Only one."

The Imam said, "You are lying. By the One but Whom there is no god, they divided into 71 sects. All of them are in hell save one. God says: *Among the people of Moses is a nation who guide [the people] by the truth and do justice thereby* (7:159). That is the sect that is saved."[3]

(12) Concerning the same verse [7:159] Imam al-Bāqir said: They [the guided Jews] are a people from the other side of China. There is

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1 *Al-Durr al-manthūr*, on the authority of Ibn Abī Ḥātim.

2 This was the title of the head of the Jewish rabbis. (Trans.)

3 *Tafsīr al-ʿAyyāshī*, on the authority of Abū al-Ṣahbāʾ [or Abū al-Ṣuhbān] al-Bakrī.

a valley of sand between them and China. They neither deviated from, nor changed anything [of Moses' teachings].[1]

Author's comment: This is a weak narration; its attribution to the Imam is not certain. There is no news of such a just and guiding community of Jews there today. Even if they existed today, they would be neither guides nor guided because: (i) Prophet Moses' religion was abrogated by Prophet Jesus'. (ii) Both of their religions were abrogated by the Prophet Muḥammad's. That is why some of those who have narrated this superstitious account were forced to add to it: "The Prophet visited them on the night of his ascension (*miʿrāj*). He called them to his message, and they accepted. Then he taught them how to pray." They have fabricated a variety of strange stories about them, some of which we shall see presently.

(13) Muqātil said: One of God's special favors upon Muḥammad was that on the night of his ascension, he got to see the followers of Moses who are on the other side of China. They were first in the Holy Land, but when the Children of Israel disobeyed God and started killing those who enjoined them to justice, they prayed to their Lord, "O God, take us away from their midst." God answered their request: He made a tunnel for them in the ground, and they entered it. There He made a stream for them and a lamp that went ahead of them. They walked 1.5 years from Jerusalem to the place where they are now. Then God brought them out into a land where there were only a community of insects, cattle and predators: a land that was free from sin and disobedience. So the Prophet went to them with Gabriel on that night. They believed in him and confirmed him; and he taught them how to pray. They said that Moses had prophesied this.[2]

(14) Al-Shaʿbī said: There are some servants of God on the other side of Andalusia, as far as Andalusia is from us [in Kūfah]. They cannot imagine that any creature would disobey God. Their pebbles are of pearls (*durr*) and ruby (*yāqūt*); their mountains are of gold and silver. They neither cultivate, nor harvest, nor do any work. They have a tree in front of their door with wide leaves which they use as clothes. And they have a tree in front of their door

1 *Majmaʿ al-bayān*.

2 *Al-Durr al-manthūr*.

with fruits that they eat.[1]

Author's comment: There are other stories narrated about them. All of these are fabricated. The meaning of the verse should be clear based on our exposition above.

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1 *Al-Durr al-manthūr*.

Verses 161-171

وَ إِذْ قِيلَ لَهُمُ اسْكُنُوا هذِهِ الْقَرْيَةَ وَ كُلُوا مِنْها حَيْثُ شِئْتُمْ وَ قُولُوا حِطَّةٌ وَ
ادْخُلُوا الْبابَ سُجَّداً نَغْفِرْ لَكُمْ خَطِيئاتِكُمْ سَنَزِيدُ الْمُحْسِنِينَ ﴿١٦١﴾ فَبَدَّلَ
الَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا مِنْهُمْ قَوْلاً غَيْرَ الَّذِى قِيلَ لَهُمْ فَأَرْسَلْنا عَلَيْهِمْ رِجْزاً مِنَ السَّماءِ
بِما كانُوا يَظْلِمُونَ ﴿١٦٢﴾ وَ سْئَلْهُمْ عَنِ الْقَرْيَةِ الَّتِى كانَتْ حاضِرَةَ الْبَحْرِ إِذْ يَعْدُونَ
فِى السَّبْتِ إِذْ تَأْتِيهِمْ حِيتانُهُمْ يَوْمَ سَبْتِهِمْ شُرَّعاً وَ يَوْمَ لا يَسْبِتُونَ لا تَأْتِيهِمْ
كَذلِكَ نَبْلُوهُمْ بِما كانُوا يَفْسُقُونَ ﴿١٦٣﴾ وَ إِذْ قالَتْ أُمَّةٌ مِنْهُمْ لِمَ تَعِظُونَ قَوْماً اللَّهُ
مُهْلِكُهُمْ أَوْ مُعَذِّبُهُمْ عَذاباً شَدِيداً قالُوا مَعْذِرَةً إِلى رَبِّكُمْ وَ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَتَّقُونَ ﴿١٦٤﴾
فَلَمَّا نَسُوا ما ذُكِّرُوا بِهِ أَنْجَيْنَا الَّذِينَ يَنْهَوْنَ عَنِ السُّوءِ وَ أَخَذْنَا الَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا
بِعَذابٍ بَئِيسٍ بِما كانُوا يَفْسُقُونَ ﴿١٦٥﴾ فَلَمَّا عَتَوْا عَنْ ما نُهُوا عَنْهُ قُلْنا لَهُمْ كُونُوا
قِرَدَةً خاسِئِينَ ﴿١٦٦﴾ وَ إِذْ تَأَذَّنَ رَبُّكَ لَيَبْعَثَنَّ عَلَيْهِمْ إِلى يَوْمِ الْقِيامَةِ مَنْ يَسُومُهُمْ
سُوءَ الْعَذابِ إِنَّ رَبَّكَ لَسَرِيعُ الْعِقابِ وَ إِنَّهُ لَغَفُورٌ رَحِيمٌ ﴿١٦٧﴾ وَ قَطَّعْناهُمْ فِى
الْأَرْضِ أُمَماً مِنْهُمُ الصَّالِحُونَ وَ مِنْهُمْ دُونَ ذلِكَ وَ بَلَوْناهُمْ بِالْحَسَناتِ وَ
السَّيِّئاتِ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَرْجِعُونَ ﴿١٦٨﴾ فَخَلَفَ مِنْ بَعْدِهِمْ خَلْفٌ وَرِثُوا الْكِتابَ يَأْخُذُونَ
عَرَضَ هذَا الْأَدْنى وَ يَقُولُونَ سَيُغْفَرُ لَنا وَ إِنْ يَأْتِهِمْ عَرَضٌ مِثْلُهُ يَأْخُذُوهُ أَ لَمْ
يُؤْخَذْ عَلَيْهِمْ مِيثاقُ الْكِتابِ أَنْ لا يَقُولُوا عَلَى اللَّهِ إِلاَّ الْحَقَّ وَ دَرَسُوا ما فِيهِ وَ
الدَّارُ الْآخِرَةُ خَيْرٌ لِلَّذِينَ يَتَّقُونَ أَ فَلا تَعْقِلُونَ ﴿١٦٩﴾ وَ الَّذِينَ يُمَسِّكُونَ بِالْكِتابِ وَ
أَقامُوا الصَّلاةَ إِنَّا لا نُضِيعُ أَجْرَ الْمُصْلِحِينَ ﴿١٧٠﴾ وَ إِذْ نَتَقْنَا الْجَبَلَ فَوْقَهُمْ كَأَنَّهُ

ظُلَّةٌ وَ ظَنُّوا أَنَّهُ واقِعٌ بِهِمْ خُذُوا ما آتَيْناكُمْ بِقُوَّةٍ وَ اذْكُرُوا ما فِيهِ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَتَّقُونَ ﴿١٧١﴾

(7:161) *And when they were told, "Settle in this town and eat thereof whence you wish; and say, 'Relieve [us of the burden of our sins],' and enter prostrating at the gate, that We may forgive your iniquities, and soon We shall enhance the virtuous."*

(7:162) *But the wrongdoers changed the saying with other than what they had been told. So We sent against them a plague from the sky because of the wrongs they used to commit.*

(7:163) *Ask them about the town that was situated on the seaside, when they violated the Sabbath, when their fish would come to them on the Sabbath day, visibly on the shore, but on days when they were not keeping Sabbath they would not come to them. Thus did We test them because of the transgressions they used to commit.*

(7:164) *When a group of them said, "Why do you advise a people whom Allah will destroy or punish with a severe punishment?" They said, "As an excuse before your Lord, and [with the hope] that they may restrain [themselves]."*

(7:165) *So when they forgot what they had been reminded of We delivered those who forbade evil [conduct] and seized the wrongdoers with a terrible punishment because of the transgressions they used to commit.*

(7:166) *When they defied what they were forbidden from, We said to them, "Be you spurned apes."*

(7:167) *And when your Lord proclaimed that He would surely send against them, until the Day of Resurrection, those who would inflict on them a terrible punishment. Indeed your Lord is swift in retribution, and indeed He is All-Forgiving, Ever-Merciful.*

(7:168) *We dispersed them into communities around the earth: some of them were righteous, and some of them otherwise, and We tested them with good and bad [times] so that they may come back.*

(7:169) *Then they were succeeded by an evil posterity which inherited the Book: they grab the transitory gains of this lower world, and they say, "It will be forgiven us." And if similar transitory gains*

were to come their way, they would grab them too. Was not the covenant of the Book taken with them that they shall not attribute anything to Allah except the truth? And they have studied what is in it, and the abode of the Hereafter is better for those who are Godwary. Do you not apply reason?

(7:170) *As for those who hold fast to the Book and maintain the prayer—indeed We do not waste the reward of those who set things right.*

(7:171) *When We plucked the mountain [and held it] above them as if it were a canopy and they thought it was about to fall on them: "Hold on with power to what We have given you and remember that which is in it, so that you may be Godwary."*

Introduction

These verses narrate some other stories of the Children of Israel. They describe how the Israelites transgressed God's command and broke His covenant. Thus God seized them with the aftermath of their deeds. He put wrongdoers over them who would inflict on them a terrible punishment. That was the case of their earlier generations. They were then followed by a progeny who sold God's signs and communications for a paltry gain, and were not serious with religion, except for a few of them who do not overstep the truth.

Commentary

وَإِذْ قِيلَ لَهُمُ اسْكُنُوا هَٰذِهِ الْقَرْيَةَ وَكُلُوا مِنْهَا حَيْثُ شِئْتُمْ وَقُولُوا حِطَّةٌ وَادْخُلُوا الْبَابَ سُجَّدًا نَغْفِرْ لَكُمْ خَطِيئَاتِكُمْ ۚ سَنَزِيدُ الْمُحْسِنِينَ ﴿١٦١﴾ فَبَدَّلَ الَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا مِنْهُمْ قَوْلًا غَيْرَ الَّذِي قِيلَ لَهُمْ فَأَرْسَلْنَا عَلَيْهِمْ رِجْزًا مِنَ السَّمَاءِ بِمَا كَانُوا يَظْلِمُونَ ﴿١٦٢﴾

(7:161-162) ***And when they were told, "Settle in this town and eat thereof whence you wish; and say, 'Relieve [us of the burden of our sins],' and enter prostrating at the gate, that We may forgive your iniquities, and soon We shall enhance the virtuous." But the wrongdoers changed the saying with other than what they had been told. So We sent against them a plague from the sky because of the wrongs they used to commit.***

The "town" was in the Holy Land. They were ordered to enter it, fight the Amalekites living there, and drive them out. But they defied this command and deferred it to Moses himself. Thus they were afflicted with the wilderness. The story is discussed in Sūrah al-Mā'idah, verses 5:20-26.[1]

… and say, 'Relieve [us of the burden of our sins],' and enter prostrating at the gate…: Refer to our discussion of a similar expression to this in Sūrah al-Baqarah, verses 2:58-59.[2]

… and soon We shall enhance the virtuous: This sentence is an answer to an implied question (called a prolepsis). After saying, *that We may forgive your iniquities* (7:161), it is as though one asks, "What else?" So the verse adds: *and soon We shall enhance the virtuous.*

وَاسْأَلْهُمْ عَنِ الْقَرْيَةِ الَّتِي كَانَتْ حَاضِرَةَ الْبَحْرِ إِذْ يَعْدُونَ فِي السَّبْتِ إِذْ تَأْتِيهِمْ حِيتَانُهُمْ يَوْمَ سَبْتِهِمْ شُرَّعًا وَيَوْمَ لَا يَسْبِتُونَ ۙ لَا تَأْتِيهِمْ ۚ كَذَٰلِكَ نَبْلُوهُمْ بِمَا كَانُوا يَفْسُقُونَ ﴿١٦٣﴾

(7:163) ***Ask them about the town that was situated on* (ḥāḍirah, from ḥaḍara)** ***the seaside, when they violated the Sabbath, when their fish would come to them on the Sabbath day, visibly on the shore, but on days when they were not keeping Sabbath they would not come to them. Thus did We test them because of the transgressions they used to commit.***

The pronoun "them" in *Ask them* refers to the Children of Israel [who were living at the time of the Prophet]. *Ḥaḍara* means "to witness something and preside over it."

Ask them about the town that was situated on the seaside…: Ask the Children of Israel about the story of the town which was near the sea and on the verge of it.

… when they violated the Sabbath…: They transgressed God's limits about respecting the Sabbath and not fishing on it.

***… when their fish would come to them on the Sabbath day, visibly on the shore* (shurraʿan):** "Their fish" means the fish in their region. *Shurraʿ*

1 See volume 10 (1st ed.), pp. 108ff of the English translation. (Trans.)

2 The author has not discussed the story behind the two commands in this part of the verse anywhere in *al-Mīzān*. The cited verses are skipped over in volume 1 (1st ed.), pp. 315ff of the English translation. (Trans.)

is the plural of *shāriʿ*, which means "apparent, visible, clear."

… but on days when they were not keeping Sabbath they would not come to them: On Saturdays when they were forbidden from fishing, the fish used to be readily and visibly available to them. But once that they passed and it was permissible for them to fish—on days other than Saturday—the fish did not appear [on the surface and near the shore]. It was under these circumstances that they transgressed the limits that God had commanded. This was part of God's test and trial of them. He tempted them in this way because of rampant sinfulness among them. Their greed stirred them to catch the fish notwithstanding God's command. They did not have sufficient *taqwá* (Godwariness, self-restraint) to stop them from this violation. Hence God ends by saying:

… Thus did We test them* (nablūhum, from iblāʾ) *because of the transgressions they used to commit: We put them through a trial. *Iblāʾ* here is synonymous with *imtiḥān* (examination, trial, tribulation).

وَإِذْ قَالَتْ أُمَّةٌ مِنْهُمْ لِمَ تَعِظُونَ قَوْمًا ۙ اللَّهُ مُهْلِكُهُمْ أَوْ مُعَذِّبُهُمْ عَذَابًا شَدِيدًا ۖ قَالُوا مَعْذِرَةً إِلَىٰ رَبِّكُمْ وَلَعَلَّهُمْ يَتَّقُونَ ﴿١٦٤﴾

(7:164) ***When a group of them said, "Why do you advise a people whom Allah will destroy or punish with a severe punishment?" They said, "As an excuse before your Lord, and [with the hope] that they may restrain [themselves]."***

The audience of this speech is omitted for concision because it is understood from the content of the speech. The implied meaning is: When a group of them said to another group of them which used to admonish the wrongdoers and forbid them from violating God's law on the Sabbath.

… "Why do you advise a people whom Allah will destroy or punish with a severe punishment?"…: This statement shows that those who said it were apparently pious individuals who abstained from disobeying God's commands. Nevertheless, they did not forbid others from their evil acts, but freely associated and mingled with them. If the speakers of this statement were themselves sinners and transgressors, then the respondents—who were forbidding the sinners from sin—would have admonished them as well. But they replied to them by saying: *"As an excuse before your Lord…"*

… "As an excuse before your Lord, and [with the hope] that they

may restrain [themselves]": The verse shows that the transgressors had gone beyond all limits and were sinning openly. Therefore, it was highly unlikely of them to stop their practice. Nevertheless, those who used to admonish the sinners were not completely disappointed yet. They hoped that by persisting with their admonition, the sinners would eventually stop, or at least some of them might reduce their transgression to some extent. Moreover, their continued admonition would be an excuse for them before God, showing that they did not agree with the evil acts of the sinners, and were averse to their defiant transgression.

For this reason, in response to the objection of the other group—*"Why do you advise a people whom Allah will destroy or punish with a severe punishment?"*—they said: *"As an excuse before your Lord, and [with the hope] that they may restrain [themselves]."* That is, we advise them for two reasons: (1) so that this may be an excuse before your Lord; and (2) so that they may refrain from this act.

فَلَمَّا نَسُوا مَا ذُكِّرُوا بِهِ أَنْجَيْنَا الَّذِينَ يَنْهَوْنَ عَنِ السُّوءِ وَأَخَذْنَا الَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا بِعَذَابٍ بَئِيسٍ بِمَا كَانُوا يَفْسُقُونَ ﴿١٦٥﴾

(7:165) ***So when they forgot what they had been reminded of We delivered those who forbade evil [conduct] and seized the wrongdoers with a terrible punishment because of the transgressions they used to commit.***

What is meant by "forgetting" here is that the reminder failed to have any impact on them, not that they were literally oblivious of the admonitions. God's punishment is a consequence of someone disparaging His commands and turning away from His remembrance. Otherwise, if one is really forgetful of something, then religious obligations and their subsequent penalties are not applicable to the person.

There is always God's assistance which circles the person and reminds them of the main commands of God. If the person shows commitment and perseverance, that is good [and they grow]. But if the person fails to be steadfast, and has no inner advisor or reservation to stop them, they will overstep God's limit disobediently. At first, one feels an inner sense of pain, self-blame and constriction of the heart. If they ignore this and repeat the sin instead of repenting, the reality of that sin grows in strength in their heart, while the impact of God's initial reminder lessens, and it starts losing significance in the person's conscience. As the person

continues to repeat and insist on that sin, it grows in strength further, while the initial divine reminder becomes weaker and weaker. At some point, the reminder loses its impact completely, such that its presence and absence make no difference. That is when a "reminder" is equivalent to "forgetfulness" in terms of ineffectiveness. This is what is meant in the verse: *So when they forgot what they had been reminded of.* That is, when the admonition lost its effect, *as though* it were completely forgotten and wiped off from their souls.

This verse suggests that the delivered individuals were only those who used to forbid evil. God seized the rest with punishment, including those who broke the Sabbath, and those who objected: *Why do you advise…* (7:164). This means that the objectors [in verse 7:164] counted as partners with the transgressors in their sin and wrongdoing, because they neither admonished them nor migrated away from them.[1]

We can infer a universal divine custom from this verse. One should first try to stop the wrongdoers from their wrongdoing. If that is not possible, the second stage is to advise and admonish them. If that is not possible or fails to have any effect, the third stage is to migrate [or keep away] from them. If one fails to follow any of these stages [of forbidding evil], then the person is considered to be a partner and accomplice of the wrongdoers in their evil. For this reason, just as God's severe seizure awaits the wrongdoers, it also awaits their partners and confederates.

فَلَمَّا عَتَوْا عَنْ مَا نُهُوا عَنْهُ قُلْنَا لَهُمْ كُونُوا قِرَدَةً خَاسِئِينَ ﴿١٦٦﴾

(7:166) *When they defied* (ʿataw, from ʿutuww) *what they were forbidden from, We said to them, "Be you spurned apes* (qiradah khāsiʾīn)."

ʿUtuww means "extreme and exaggerated disobedience." *Qiradah* is the plural of *qird*, which is a famous animal (ape, monkey). *Khāsiʾ* means "an outcast, one who is driven away." When a dog goes away [with misery and despised] it is said: *khasaʾ al-kalb*.

When they defied what they were forbidden from…: What is implied here is: "When they defied *refraining from* what they were forbidden

1 This could be interpreted as either physically leaving their community, or otherwise not associating with them and cutting off their ties with them. The author's subsequent explanations favor the first possibility, although the second one still remains. (Trans.)

from." This is because ʿ*utuww* (defiance, rebellion) would apply to *abstinence* from sins, not to sins themselves. Hence, the word *tark* (refraining, abstinence) is an implied omission in the verse.[1] The rest of the meaning should be clear.

وَإِذْ تَأَذَّنَ رَبُّكَ لَيَبْعَثَنَّ عَلَيْهِمْ إِلَىٰ يَوْمِ الْقِيَامَةِ مَنْ يَسُومُهُمْ سُوءَ الْعَذَابِ ۗ إِنَّ رَبَّكَ لَسَرِيعُ الْعِقَابِ ۖ وَإِنَّهُ لَغَفُورٌ رَحِيمٌ ﴿١٦٧﴾

(7:167) ***And when your Lord proclaimed*** **(taʾadhdhana)** ***that He would surely send*** **(la-yabʿathanna)** ***against them, until the Day of Resurrection, those who would inflict on them a terrible punishment. Indeed your Lord is swift in retribution, and indeed He is All-Forgiving, Ever-Merciful.***

The letter *lām* at the beginning of *la-yabʿathanna* indicates a vow [for emphasis]. *Taʾadhdhana* and *adhdhana* are synonymous with *aʿlama* (to proclaim, to announce, to declare). The meaning is: And remind them that your Lord has proclaimed that He has sworn to raise a group over those wrongdoers as long as this world continues. This group will put those wrongdoers through a terrible punishment and make them taste it.

… Indeed your Lord is swift in retribution…: What is meant here is that *some* of God's punishments are quick to seize the perpetrators, such as the retribution of the transgressors for their transgression. The Qur'an says: *those who rebelled [against Allah] in their cities… Indeed your Lord is in ambush* (89:11-14). This interpretation [that the verse is about *some* of God's retributions] is based on the next part of the verse: *and indeed He is All-Forgiving, Ever-Merciful*. Apparently this last part is added only to show that God is not *always* swift in retribution. Otherwise, when the verse is entirely about punishment and requital, it is incongruous to end it with the two names of All-Forgiving and Ever-Merciful.

… Indeed your Lord is swift in retribution, and indeed He is All-Forgiving, Ever-Merciful: Given the above explanations, this part can be elaborated as follows: God is certainly Compassionate to His servants, and forgives their sins. Nonetheless, there are some forms of transgression and defiance which make punishment definite for their committers. Thus God ordains punishment for those servants. In such cases, His

1 The author has adopted this from al-Rāzī, and he will refer to it in his examination of the narrations below. (Trans.)

retribution will quickly chase and seize them, since there is no obstacle or barrier to hinder it.

… Indeed your Lord is swift in retribution…: According to some exegetes, this means that God is swift in retribution for those whom He wills to punish in this world. Perhaps what they mean is what we said above. Meanwhile, it is better to offer this as an interpretation for the entire phrase: *Indeed your Lord is swift in retribution, and indeed He is All-Forgiving, Ever-Merciful*. This way, one would not be mistakenly led to think that "if God is tolerant and does not rush to seize His servants with punishment, then how could He be swift in retribution?"

وَقَطَّعْنَاهُمْ فِي الْأَرْضِ أُمَمًا ۖ مِنْهُمُ الصَّالِحُونَ وَمِنْهُمْ دُونَ ذَٰلِكَ ۖ وَبَلَوْنَاهُمْ بِالْحَسَنَاتِ وَالسَّيِّئَاتِ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَرْجِعُونَ ﴿١٦٨﴾

(7:168) ***We dispersed them into communities around the earth: some of them were righteous, and some of them otherwise* (dūna dhālika)*, and We tested them with good and bad [times] so that they may come back.***

"Good" (*ḥasanāt*) and "bad" (*sayyiʾāt*) mean fortune and misfortune in this world, respectively. *Majmaʿ al-bayān* says:

The preposition *dūna* (other, beside, below) is grammatically *marfūʿ* in terms of inflection because it is in the place of the subject (*fāʿil*) of the sentence. However, it is recorded as *manṣūb* because it is most commonly used to indicate the receptacle of something (*ẓarf*). According to Abū al-Ḥasan, two other similar examples are: *Certainly all links between you* (baynakum) *have been cut* (6:94) and: *On the Day of Resurrection: He will separate you [from one another]* (baynakum) (60:3), where the preposition *bayna* (between) is recorded as *manṣūb* instead of *marfūʿ* for the same reason. Another possibility is to say that there is an implied omission here: "and some of them are a community *(jamāʿatun)* otherwise" (7:168), where *dūna dhālika* (otherwise) is an adjective that is taking the place of its omitted noun (*jamāʿah*).[1]

The rest of the verse should be clear.

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1 In Arabic, the subject of a sentence has a u phonetic at the end, which is called *marfūʿ*. A *ẓarf* (container, receptacle, circumstance) ends with the a sound, called *manṣūb*. The paragraph is meant to explain why these grammatical rules are not observed in certain cases. (Trans.)

فَخَلَفَ مِنْ بَعْدِهِمْ خَلْفٌ وَرِثُوا الْكِتَابَ يَأْخُذُونَ عَرَضَ هَٰذَا الْأَدْنَىٰ وَيَقُولُونَ سَيُغْفَرُ لَنَا وَإِنْ يَأْتِهِمْ عَرَضٌ مِثْلُهُ يَأْخُذُوهُ ۚ أَلَمْ يُؤْخَذْ عَلَيْهِمْ مِيثَاقُ الْكِتَابِ أَنْ لَا يَقُولُوا عَلَى اللَّهِ إِلَّا الْحَقَّ وَدَرَسُوا مَا فِيهِ ۗ وَالدَّارُ الْآخِرَةُ خَيْرٌ لِلَّذِينَ يَتَّقُونَ ۗ أَفَلَا تَعْقِلُونَ ﴿١٦٩﴾

(7:169) ***Then they were succeeded by an evil posterity which inherited the Book: they grab the transitory gains*** (**ʿaraḍ**) ***of this lower world*** (**al-adná**)***, and they say, "It will be forgiven us." And if similar transitory gains were to come their way, they would grab them too. Was not the covenant of the Book taken with them that they shall not attribute anything to Allah except the truth? And they have studied what is in it, and the abode of the Hereafter is better for those who are Godwary. Do you not apply reason?***

ʿAraḍ means "something unstable and passing." Elsewhere God says: *the transitory wares* (ʿaraḍ) *of the life of this world* (4:94), meaning worldly affairs that have no stability or persistence. *Adná* is a masculine comparative adjective, meaning "lower, more inferior, baser." Its feminine counterpart is *dunyā*, which is used as a noun for the present world [as opposed to the hereafter]. What is meant by the "*ʿaraḍ* of *adná*" is the immediate pleasures of this world. The uncommon use of the masculine (*adná*) in this verse instead of the feminine (*dunyā*) indicates that this world is not even worthy of notice. When one does not know the characteristics of something, they refer to it with the masculine, as the generic default form. Likewise, God refers to this world with the default masculine, pretending not to know anything about it. This is itself a derogatory reference. It shows that there is nothing special with worldly gains to be interested in. We saw a similar usage to this in the verse where Abraham refers to the sun [which is feminine] with a masculine pronoun (*hādhā*): *This* (hādhā) *is my Lord! This* (hādhā) *is bigger!* (6:78).

… and they say, "It will be forgiven us"…: This is a rather meaningless statement that they said. They had no basis to support this claim. They said it out of pride in their lineage, which they considered to be God's tribe, just as they called themselves *God's children and His beloved ones* (5:18). They were not planning to repent in the future, because there is no evidence in the verse to support this qualification. Neither was it an expression of their hope in God's extensive forgiveness, because genuine

hope has certain signs which are not compatible with what is mentioned in this verse. Hoping for some good is inseparable from the fear of its opposite evil. They are two sides of the same coin. Just as hope gives security and comfort to the soul, fear causes worry and discomfort in the soul. Therefore, if one is genuinely hopeful of something, they would stand somewhere in the middle of security and insecurity, attraction and aversion, joy and sorrow.

The descriptions in this verse, however, correspond to those who engross themselves in worldly pleasures and go to the extremes of their base desires, without any regard for the consequences of what they commit and acquire. Then, when they are admonished—by their conscience from inside, or by some external source—about the punishments that God has prepared for the wrongdoers, and are reminded of the evil end of the sinners, they simply shrug their shoulders and say: "Indeed God is All-Forgiving, Ever-Merciful." But this is only a way of exonerating themselves from the blame, so that they can continue to indulge in their pleasures without any sense of guilt. What they put on is not true hope (*rajāʾ*), but a false selfish dream and a fatal temptation from the Devil. Otherwise, *whoever expects to encounter his Lord—let him act righteously, and not associate anyone with the service of his Lord* (18:110).

… And if similar transitory gains were to come their way, they would grab them too…: They were never content with any share of worldly gains that they had. If they would refrain at some point and abstain from committing unlawful acts, that itself could count as a form of repentance by them. In that case, their claim, *"It will be forgiven us"* could be something that a true repenter says. Instead, whenever they came across some worldly gain, they would snatch it without having any regard for God. Based on this meaning, what is said here—*And if similar transitory gains were to come their way, they would grab them too*—amounts to another description of them elsewhere in the Qur'an: *They would not refrain from the wrongs that they committed* (5:79).

… And they have studied what is in it…: Apparently the conjunction "and" (the letter *wāw*) at the beginning of this sentence indicates the condition of the subject (called *al-wāw al-ḥāliyyah*). The sentence functions as a *ḥāl* (circumstantial qualifier, participial phrase) for the pronoun *ʿalayhim*

("with them" in *Was not the covenant of the Book taken with them*).[1] Some have suggested that the conjunction "and" joins this sentence to *which inherited the Book* at the beginning of the verse.[2] However, this is unlikely.

… and the abode of the Hereafter is better…: The conjunction "and" (the letter *wāw*) at the beginning of this sentence also functions as a *ḥāl* (circumstantial qualifier, participial phrase).[3]

The meaning is: *Then they*: the former generations of Israel, whose state of piety and abstinence from sins was discussed above; *were succeeded by an evil posterity which inherited the Book*: they received the teachings, laws, admonitions and lessons in the scripture. This entailed that they should refrain from sins, aim for the next abode, and leave the transitory gains of this precarious world which disorient them from God's eternal rewards. *They grab the transitory gains of this lower world*: they dived into the immediate gratification of transient pleasures, and did not mind if it were sin, whether little or much. *And they say, "It will be forgiven us"*: but this was not true, because they never repented. What they did was not only once or twice, but they consistently fell for it whenever there was an opportunity to repeat it. *And if similar transitory gains were to come their way, they would grab them too*: they never refrained from the disobedience that they committed.

Was not the covenant of the Book taken with them: they made this covenant when they inherited the Book; *that they shall not attribute anything to Allah except the truth? And they have studied what is in it*: this is while they had studied what is in the Book, and thus knew that their statement, *"It will be forgiven us"* was an unwarranted claim and they had no right to say it. This only provoked them to continue disobeying God and destroying the foundations of His religion. *And the abode of the Hereafter is better for those who are Godwary*: because its pleasures are everlasting and it is secure from every evil. *Do you not apply reason?*

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1 The meaning would be: "The covenant of the Book was taken with them while they studied what is in it;" or: "The covenant of the Book was taken with them through their study of it." (Trans.)

2 That is: "They inherited the Book and studied what is in it, yet they immersed in materialism." (Trans.)

3 The meaning is: "They plunged in worldly pleasures even though the abode of the Hereafter is better for those who are Godwary." (Trans.)

وَالَّذِينَ يُمَسِّكُونَ بِالْكِتَابِ وَأَقَامُوا الصَّلَاةَ إِنَّا لَا نُضِيعُ أَجْرَ الْمُصْلِحِينَ ﴿١٧٠﴾

(7:170) ***As for those who hold fast*** **(yumassikūna, from massaka)** ***to the Book and maintain the prayer—indeed We do not waste the reward of those who set things right*** **(al-muṣliḥīn, from iṣlāḥ).**

Majmaᶜ al-bayān says: "*Amsaka*, *masaka*, *tamassaka* and *istamsaka* are all synonymous. They are used when one clings to something."

Out of all components of religion, the verse mentions the prayer in particular. This shows the lofty position of the prayer. It is one of the pillars of religion which maintains the remembrance of God and humility before the divine—and that is the spirit of life in all religious laws and rituals.

The verse equates *those who hold fast to the Book* with *those who set things right*. The latter is the contrary of those who make mischief and cause corruption either in the earth or in human societies living on the earth. The corruption of the earth and human societies is a result of deviating from the path of our divine intuition (*fiṭrah*), with which God originated us. The divine religions in history—which were conveyed through scriptures—were exactly based on this path of divine intuition, in accordance to the capacities and conditions of the people of the time. God says in the Qur'an that His upright religion—meaning a religion which serves the needs of human life—is the same as the pristine nature and original makeup of human creation, which defines their essence and reality: *So set your heart on the religion as a people of pure faith, the origination of Allah according to which He originated humankind. There is no altering Allah's creation; that is the upright religion, but most people do not know* (30:30). Elsewhere He says: *Indeed, with Allah religion is Islam* (3:19). What is meant by *islām* [in the Qur'an, or in this verse] is *taslīm* (submission). That means submitting to His customs in the world of creation (*takwīn*), which are the basis for His laws in the world of legislation (*tashrīᶜ*).[1]

As one can see, these two verses [30:30 and 3:19] proclaim that following God's religion means synchronizing one's life with the world of existence and the laws that are entailed by it. This will bring one to what the human species calls for by its very nature. Then one will become a "natural human," meaning that they will grow and develop according to

1 That is, divine injunctions—of dos and don'ts—are derived from some fact in existence. (Trans.)

what their very human nature and essence requires. Among the things that the pristine makeup of a natural human calls for are: (1) humility before the supernatural Origin Who is the source of one's existence, subsistence and success; (2) matching all aspects of one's life with the laws that govern the world of existence. Living up to these requirements [of our most pristine nature and intuition (*fiṭrah*)] is called *islām* (submission), which is the message of the Qur'an and all other divine books which God revealed to His prophets and messengers.

This shows that *iṣlāḥ* (setting things right) is part and parcel of the religion of *islām* (submission).[1] *Iṣlāḥ* means straightening the various aspects of human life, purifying it from all extraneous superstitions, and removing the weights and shackles that were laid upon the people as a result of illusions and desires. This is exactly what *defines* the religion of submission, not an outcome, spin-off or add-on which accrues to it *afterwards*. Hence, there is no room for difference of opinion at this level [about *iṣlāḥ* being an essential element of *islām*]. It is not something that one would accept and one would reject, so that then a seeker of truth would have to investigate all sides and then follow what seems most plausible to them.[2]

In other words, people are called to a set of laws and principles which *incorporate* their interests in this life and the hereafter. It is not that religious laws and teachings are first set up [conventionally], and then it is claimed that they map onto the people's interests. The reader should reflect on this.[3]

Here is a common misconception that the reader should be aware of: It is sometimes presumed that God's religion is a set of crude doctrines and practices which one simply has to follow. There is no spirit to them other than the spirit of force and arbitrary assignment; and the language of religious discourse is that of rough authority and tough control. Their standard is only to be found after death: the eternal pleasures that God has prepared for those who obey, and the everlasting punishment that He

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1 As the reader should have noticed by now, *islām* is used in its general sense in the current discussion, which includes all divine religions. (Trans.)

2 Because it is a matter of definition, through analysis. (Trans.)

3 This is based on the idea that religious laws and teachings are not arbitrary or conventional, but they stem from existential realities. There is a necessary causal link between the two. (Trans.)

has decreed for those to disobey. That is why God has made it obligatory to follow these teachings and be subservient to them. Otherwise, there is no connection between religious ordinances and the laws of creation in this world, which govern the lives of people, sustain their existence here, and define their well-being.

This effectively reduces religious acts to shackles that tie the hands of the people in this life. Even with respect to the hereafter, it is only God's decree which results in their salvation [otherwise there is no essential connection between an action and its results in the hereafter]. This means that a religious person does not taste the pleasure of true human life in this world. Their pleasure [of their religious life and acts] will rather be like those who are addicted to opium or poison, to the point that they enjoy what is painful to a wholesome and natural state, and suffer from what a healthy person enjoys.

The above notion is a result of ignorance about religious teachings, and implies a false accusation against the Holy Prescriber of religion. This is against the Qur'an. There are numerous verses which prove contrary to this either explicitly or implicitly, with either direct or indirect reference. Religion's message does not consist of two separate entities: first calling the people to follow certain laws, and then claiming that this will bring about their good and felicity. If that were the case, then one could doubt and question the link between the two.

Rather, God's book is book that comprises the interests of God's servants. It includes teachings that will set human societies straight. In fact, that is exactly how we define, identify and evaluate a book as a divine one: a divine religion is a set of laws which serve the interest of the individual and the society, and vice versa. Religion calls the people to set their actions right and straighten every aspect of their society. This is called religious submission (*islām*) to God, which is no different than acting in accordance to the requirements and implications of God's creation (*takwīn*). That is when one follows the path of a natural human, which is a path that is defined by the world of creation and existence. Following this path and being submissive to God's creation is tantamount to submission to what God wants from us.

As for those who hold fast to the Book…: Taken alone, this verse has a complete and independent message of its own [which would apply to the followers of any divine religion and scripture]. However, given the context,

it would primarily pertain to the Children of Israel and their story. In this light, *the Book* would refer to the Torah, or both the Torah and the Gospel.

وَإِذْ نَتَقْنَا الْجَبَلَ فَوْقَهُمْ كَأَنَّهُ ظُلَّةٌ وَظَنُّوا أَنَّهُ وَاقِعٌ بِهِمْ خُذُوا مَا آتَيْنَاكُمْ بِقُوَّةٍ وَاذْكُرُوا مَا فِيهِ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَتَّقُونَ ﴿١٧١﴾

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(7:171) ***When We plucked* (nataqnā) *the mountain [and held it] above them as if it were a canopy* (ẓullah) *and they thought it was about to fall on them: "Hold on with power to what We have given you and remember that which is in it, so that you may be Godwary."***

Natq means "pulling something out by the roots." *Ẓullah* means "cloud" or anything that one uses as a shade, such as a roof. The rest of the terms should be clear. This verse narrates the story of Mount Ṭūr being raised above the heads of the Children of Israel. We already read and discussed this story more than once, in Sūrah al-Baqarah [verses 2:63 and 2:93] and Sūrah al-Nisāʾ [verse 4:154].[1]

Examining Narrations

(1) Imam al-Bāqir said: We found it written in the book of ʿAlī: There were some people in Aylah from the descendants of the tribe Thamūd. The fish used to swim through the rivers to their doorsteps and markets on Saturdays, and would appear to them visibly. This was so that God could test their obedience. But they started catching the fish and eating them. They continued this for as long as God wanted, while neither their priests nor their scholars admonished or stopped them against fishing. Then Satan inspired to some of them, "You have been forbidden to *eat* it on Saturday, not to *catch* it." Thus they fished on Saturdays, and ate it on other days.

A group of them justified their act by saying, "Now [on Saturday] we catch it [only]." But another group—who were the People of the Right—said, "We warn you against God's punishment for violating His command." A third group—who were the People of the Left—withdrew, remained silent, and did not admonish the

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1 See volume 2 (1st ed.), pp. 332-333, and volume 9 (1st ed.), p. 180 of the English translation. (Trans.)

wrongdoers. They said to the admonishing group: *Why do you advise a people whom Allah will destroy or punish with a severe punishment?* (7:164). They replied: *As an excuse before your Lord, and [with the hope] that they may restrain [themselves]* (7:164).

God says: *So when they forgot what they had been reminded of* (7:165): that is, when they neglected the admonition and persisted with the sin. Then the admonishers said, "Nay, by God! We shall not associate with you, nor stay a single night with you in this city where you have disobeyed God, for we fear that a disaster may come and take us with you."

They left the city, being afraid of a disaster that may strike them. They settled somewhere close to the city and spent the night under the sky. Next day, the God's friends who were obedient to His commands went to see the condition of the sinners. They found the gates of the city to be shut. They knocked, but no one opened, nor did they hear the sound of anyone. They set up a ladder and one of them climbed up the wall of the city. When he looked at the city from above, he saw a group of apes with tails, growling at one another. They broke the gate open and entered. The sinners recognized their human relatives, but not vice versa. The humans said to the apes, "Didn't we warn you?"

Then Imam ᶜAlī said, "By the One Who has split the seed and has created the people, I certainly know their descendants among this nation. They do not mind evil and have no religious zeal against it. They have neglected what they were commanded, and have thus deviated [from one another, or from the right path]. God says: *So away with the wrongdoing lot* (23:41)."[1] God says: *We delivered those who forbade evil [conduct] and seized the wrongdoers with a terrible punishment because of the transgressions they used to commit* (7:165).[2]

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1 It is not clear whether the rest is part of Imam ᶜAlī's speech, Imam al-Bāqir's, or al-Qummī's. (Trans.)

2 *Tafsīr al-Qummī*, on the authority of his father, on the authority of al-Ḥasan b. Maḥbūb, on the authority of Ibn Abī ᶜUmayr, on the authority of Abū ᶜUbaydah. It is also narrated by al-ᶜAyyāshī in his *Tafsīr*, on the authority of Abū ᶜUbaydah, from Imam al-Bāqir.

Author's comment: The same notion is narrated from Ibn ʿAbbās, with the difference that the people there were a branch of the Israelites living in Aylah.[1] Based on the Qur'an, they were apparently the Children of Israel, while Imam al-Bāqir's hadith explicitly says that they were from the tribe Thamūd. It is possible that they were some Arabs of Thamūd who converted to Judaism given their geographical proximity. As it is said, Aylah was a city between Egypt and Medina, harboring the Red Sea.

Some other suggested places for the *town* [in verse 7:163] are: (i) Madyan. (ii) Ṭabariyyah. (iii) A town called Maqnā, located between Madyan and ʿAynūnā.

(2) Ibn ʿAbbās used to weep and say: Those who forbid [others from sins] were saved. Those who committed [sins] perished. I do not know what was the fate of those who stayed silent.[2]

(3) ʿIkrimah says: I told Ibn ʿAbbās, "May God make me your ransom! Don't you see that the silent ones resented their practice [of violating the Sabbath], did not comply with them, but said: *Why do you advise a people whom Allah will destroy* (7:164)?" Upon hearing this, Ibn ʿAbbās ordered that I be given two thick [and valuable] garments. By doing this, he showed his approval of my view—that the silent ones must have been saved because they resented the practice of the sinners and believed that they will certainly be punished. He presented me with the two garments and adopted my view.[3]

Author's comment: ʿIkrimah made a mistake here. Here are a few points in this regard:

(i) It is true that the silent ones did not approve of the sin and did not participate in unlawful fishing, but they committed an even greater sin: neglecting to forbid others of evil. The admonishers reminded them of this by saying: *As an excuse before your Lord, and [with the hope] that they may restrain [themselves]* (7:164). This statement shows that there was still some hope that admonition may prove effective, which means that the

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1 *Al-Durr al-manthūr*, on the authority of ʿAbd al-Razzāq, Ibn Jarīr, Ibn Abī Ḥātim and al-Bayhaqī's *al-Sunan*, on the authority of ʿIkrimah.

2 *Al-Durr al-manthūr*. This is part of the above mentioned narration from him, as well as other accounts.

3 *Al-Durr al-manthūr*.

duty of forbidding evil was still applicable.

(ii) Once all hopes of their guidance were exhausted, the admonishers deserted them and departed from them, while the other group did not migrate away from their community, as per the narrations.

(iii) The Qur'an says: *We delivered those who forbade evil [conduct] and seized the wrongdoers with a terrible punishment because of the transgressions they used to commit* (7:165). The verse identifies those who were delivered only as *those who forbade evil*. As with the ones who were punished, it mentions *the wrongdoers*, which is a general title that could include those who failed to forbid evil.

(iv) There are two possibilities with respect to the following verse: *When they defied what they were forbidden from, We said to them, "Be you spurned apes"* (7:166). (1) The word *tark* (refraining) is an implied omission here, as we narrated from the exegetes [in our exposition of the verse]. If so, then the punishment mentioned in this verse would specifically pertain to those who fished on the Sabbath. Nevertheless, the last verse would still include both the fishers and the silent ones because the general title *wrongdoers* applies to both groups.[1] (2) There is no omission in the verse, which means that the verse is about turning away from forbidding others against evil. Then the verse would specifically pertain to the silent ones. In that case, the punishment of the fishers should be sought in the last verse: *So when they forgot what they had been reminded of…* (7:165). Some narrations quoted below seem to suggest this view.

(4) Imam al-Ṣādiq said: The group that forbade was saved; the other two groups were destroyed (*halakat*).[2]

Author's comment: The verse explicitly says that the violators were transfigured. This, however, is not contrary to the above narration, because *halāk* (being destroyed, dying) has a general meaning which can also

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1 Verse 7:166 is an interpretative and elaborative continuation of verse 7:165. Therefore, the unity of context and the connection between the verses would require the pronouns in verse 7:165 to also refer to the fishers only. It should also be noted that this entire story (7:163-167) is centered around those who broke the Sabbath, which was an integral part of God's covenant with the Children of Israel. Forbidding evil, albeit very important otherwise, is not the primary theme of these verses. Therefore, it is most consistent to say that the verses are silent about the fate of the third group. (Trans.)

2 *Majmaᶜ al-bayān*.

include transfiguration (*maskh*). Moreover, there are abundant narrations saying that those who are transfigured only live a few days after their transfiguration, and then they die.

(5) Concerning *So when they forgot what they had been reminded of We delivered those who forbade evil [conduct]* (7:165) Imam al-Ṣādiq said: They were three groups: (1) One group obeyed and commanded others [to obey]. They were saved. (2) One group obeyed but did not command others [to obey]. They were transfigured. (3) One group neither obeyed nor commanded others [to obey]. They died.[1]

Author's comment: As one can see, this narration implies that the verse, *When they defied what they were forbidden from, We said to them, "Be you spurned apes"* (7:166) is about the punishment of the silent ones, not those who fished unlawfully. Based on this interpretation, the verb *ʿataw* (to defy, to disobey) in the verse means *kuffū* (to avoid, to abstain from). The meaning would be: "When they refrained from the forbidden fishing." This way, we do not need to assume some implied omission in the verse, such as the word *tark* (refraining, abstinence) or another similar term. Then the punishment of the violators should be sought in the previous verse [7:165].

There are a few problems with this interpretation: (i) The verse is meant to justify the reason for their punishment. The reason was their failure to admonish others, not the fact that they refrained from the sin. (ii) Interpreting *ʿutuww* (defiance, rebellion) as abstinence and refraining is not quite plausible. That is not a common usage of *ʿutuww*. (iii) The narration is weak in terms of transmission.

(6) A different version of this, with the same chain of narration, is reported from Imam al-Bāqir as follows: They were three groups: (1) One group obeyed and commanded others [to obey]. (2) One group obeyed but did not command others [to obey]. (3) One group neither obeyed nor commanded others [to obey]. They died.[2]

(7) In another version, Imam al-Ṣādiq narrates from Imam al-Bāqir: "They divided into three groups: (1) One group abstained [from

1 *Al-Kāfī*, on the authority of Sahl b. Ziyād, on the authority of ʿAmr b. ʿUthmān, on the authority of ʿAbd-Allāh b. al-Mughīrah, on the authority of Ṭalḥah b. Yazīd.

2 *Al-Khiṣāl*.

sin] and retreated [from the community of sinners]. (2) One group stayed among them but did not commit sins. (3) One group committed sins. Only the first group was delivered from the punishment."

(8) Then Imam al-Ṣādiq adds: I asked my father, "What happened to those who stayed among them but did not commit sins?" Imam al-Bāqir replied, "I heard that they turned into ants."[1]

Author's comment: Apparently the last three numbers are all different versions of the same narration. Their contents differ from one another, and their chains of narration are weak.

(9) Imam al-Ṣādiq said: God has distinguished His servants with two verses in His Book, to not affirm something unless they know it, and to not reject something that they do not know. The Almighty God says: *Was not the covenant of the Book taken with them that they shall not attribute anything to Allah except the truth?* (7:169); *Rather, they deny that whose knowledge they do not comprehend, and whose explanation has not yet come to them* (10:39).[2]

(10) Concerning verse 7:171 (*When We plucked the mountain…*) Imam al-Ṣādiq said: When God revealed the Torah to the Children of Israel, they did not accept it. So God raised Mount Sinai over them, and Moses said to them, "If you do not accept [the Torah], the mountain will tumble over you." Thus they accepted it and lowered their heads [in submission].[3]

(11) A similar account to this is narrated in Sunni sources from Thābit b. al-Ḥajjāj: The Torah was given to the Children of Israel all at once. This was too much for them, so they refused to accept it. Then God made the mountain overshadow them, at which point they accepted it.[4]

(12) Once Imam al-Bāqir was sitting in the *ḥaram* [in Mecca] and a group of his friends were gathered around him. Then Ṭāwūs

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1 *Tafsīr al-ʿAyyāshī*, also narrated on the authority of Ṭalḥah.

2 *Al-Kāfī*, via its chain of narration, on the authority Isḥāq b. ʿAbd-Allāh. Al-ʿAyyāshī has also narrated this from Imam al-Ṣādiq, on the authority of Isḥāq, and a similar narration from Imam al-Kāẓim, on the authority of Isḥāq b. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz.

3 *Tafsīr al-Qummī*.

4 *Al-Durr al-manthūr*.

al-Yamānī came in with a retinue of his companions. He told Imam al-Bāqir, "Would you permit me to ask you questions?"
"It is granted. Ask!"
Ṭāwūs started asking, and the Imam replied. Among his questions was: "Inform me of something that flew only once, but never before nor after that, which God has mentioned in the Qur'an."
The Imam replied, "That was Mount Sinai. The Almighty God made it fly over the Children of Israel. It overshadowed them with one side of it, in which there were many kinds of punishment, until they accepted the Torah. That is what God says: *When We plucked the mountain [and held it] above them as if it were a canopy and they thought it was about to fall on them…* (7:171)."

(13) A similar account to this is narrated in Sunni sources from Ibn ᶜAbbās. It is narrated that the Roman Emperor Heracles wrote a letter with a set of questions to Muᶜāwiyah, who was told [by his advisors], "This is not your job. Should you make any mistake in your reply, he will censure you for it. Instead, write a letter to Ibn ᶜAbbās [to answer these]." Thus he did, and then forwarded the answers of Ibn ᶜAbbās to the Emperor. When the Emperor read the answers he said, "No one would know these except a prophet or his household."[1]

Author's comment: There are some other narrations relating to these verses, which we presented under their counterparts in Sūrah al-Baqarah. Interested readers should refer to them.[2]

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1 *Al-Durr al-manthūr*.

2 See the author's discussion of traditions under verses 2:49-61 and 2:63-74; volume 1 (1st ed.), pp. 320 and 341-342 of the English translation. (Trans.)

Verses 172-174

وَ إِذْ أَخَذَ رَبُّكَ مِنْ بَنِي آدَمَ مِنْ ظُهُورِهِمْ ذُرِّيَّتَهُمْ وَ أَشْهَدَهُمْ عَلى أَنْفُسِهِمْ أَ
لَسْتُ بِرَبِّكُمْ قالُوا بَلى شَهِدْنا أَنْ تَقُولُوا يَوْمَ الْقِيامَةِ إِنَّا كُنَّا عَنْ هذا غافِلِينَ
﴿١٧٢﴾ أَوْ تَقُولُوا إِنَّما أَشْرَكَ آباؤُنا مِنْ قَبْلُ وَ كُنَّا ذُرِّيَّةً مِنْ بَعْدِهِمْ أَ فَتُهْلِكُنا بِما
فَعَلَ الْمُبْطِلُونَ ﴿١٧٣﴾ وَ كَذلِكَ نُفَصِّلُ الْآياتِ وَ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَرْجِعُونَ ﴿١٧٤﴾

(7:172) *When your Lord took from the Children of Adam, from their loins, their descendants and He made them bear witness over themselves, [He said to them,] "Am I not your Lord?" They said, "Yes indeed! We bear witness." [This,] lest you should say on the Day of Resurrection, "Indeed we were unaware of this,"*

(7:173) *or lest you should say, "Our fathers ascribed partners [to Allah] before [us] and we were descendants after them. Will You then destroy us because of what the falsifiers have done?"*

(7:174) *Thus do We elaborate the communications, and so that they may come back.*

Introduction

These verses refer to God's covenant with the Children of Adam concerning His Lordship. They are among the most subtle verses of the Qur'an in terms of meaning, and the most elegant in terms of expression.

Commentary

وَ إِذْ أَخَذَ رَبُّكَ مِنْ بَنِي آدَمَ مِنْ ظُهُورِهِمْ ذُرِّيَّتَهُمْ وَ أَشْهَدَهُمْ عَلى أَنْفُسِهِمْ أَ
لَسْتُ بِرَبِّكُمْ قالُوا بَلى شَهِدْنا أَنْ تَقُولُوا يَوْمَ الْقِيامَةِ إِنَّا كُنَّا عَنْ هذا غافِلِينَ﴿١٧٢﴾

(7:172) ***When your Lord took*** **(akhadhnā, from akhdh)** ***from the***

Children of Adam, from their loins, their descendants and He made them bear witness over themselves, [He said to them,] "Am I not your Lord?" They said, "Yes indeed! We bear witness." [This,] lest you should say on the Day of Resurrection, "Indeed we were unaware of this."

When something is "taken" (*akhdh*) from something else, it means that it is separated from it as an independent entity in one way or another. This can vary according to context and usage. Some examples are: (1) Taking a bite from a food, or taking a sip of water from a glass. (2) Taking money or possessions from a robber, a generous person, a seller, or a lender. (3) Taking knowledge from a scholar, taking [intellectual] provision from a session, taking pleasure from meeting a friend. (4) Taking a child from the father for education.

These applications show that the mere usage of the verb *akhdh* does not clarify the meaning unless more is added. That is why God complements it with: *from the Children of Adam*. This shows that they were separated and differentiated from one another.

… from their loins…: The partitive particle "from" (*min*) shows that only a part of the original object was taken, such that it maintained its form and did not lose its completeness and independence. The piece that was taken was then completed to become an independent object of the same kind. The child is initially a part of the parents, but then it is taken from their loins, separated as a new entity, and developed into a complete human being. Subsequently, another child is taken from the loin of this person, until every person is extracted and all parts are separated from their initial wholes. Then all humans become distinct, and stand as independent individuals. Each has their own soul, and will bear the good or evil consequences of their own deeds. This is what we can deduce from the expression: *When your Lord took from the Children of Adam, from their loins, their descendants*. Had the verse not mentioned *from their loins*, or had it said, "When your Lord dispersed the Children of Adam," the meaning would have remained ambiguous.

… and He made them bear witness* (ashhadahum) *over themselves…: This sentence refers to another divine act with the Children of Adam after completely separating them from one another. To make one bear witness over something means summoning the witness to the scene and showing them the fact of the matter so that they may observe it directly. Making them witness over themselves means showing the reality of themselves

to them in a way that they observe what He wants them to observe about themselves, so that they can later testify to what they witnessed whenever they are questioned about it [in God's court of justice on the Day of Judgment].

Every soul has some relations with other things, and one could be made witness over any of them. This is clarified by: *"Am I not your Lord?"* That is what they were made to witness. God's purpose was that they may witness His Lordship, so that they would testify to it whenever questioned about it.

No matter how proud and arrogant one becomes; no matter to what extent one is supported by favorable circumstances; no matter how much one is deceived by the availability of all means and facilities; still no one can deny in themselves that they do not own themselves and are not independent in managing their affairs. If one were their own owner, they would have shielded themselves against misfortunes like death, pain, and disaster. And if one were independent in managing their affairs, they would not need to resort to different means and instruments in the world, even though one may view oneself as having full control and dominance over those instruments. Moreover, one would realize that their means, instruments and connections are equally in need of what lies beyond them. They are subservient to a higher Ruler, whether He rules for or against them. It is not up to one to remove one's needs and fulfill one's wishes.

The need for God—that is, our Owner and Director—is the *reality* of the human being. Poverty is inscribed on our souls; weakness is sealed on our foreheads. This is not concealed from anyone with the slightest degree of reason, whether they are educated or illiterate, old or young, noble or lay. This means that the human beings, in any stage of their human existence, witness in themselves that they have a Lord Who owns them and directs their affairs. How could they not witness their Lord when they witness their essential need? Is it conceivable that one may realize a need in oneself without realizing the other side to whom one is in need?[1]

… "Am I not your Lord?"…: This is what God made them witness.

… They said, "Yes indeed! We bear witness"…: This shows that they witnessed the above reality and acknowledged it.

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1 When we see anything, what we see is light. Realizing the inherent darkness of anything is tantamount to realizing the light which makes it visible. (Trans.)

Our explanations above should clarify what some exegetes have said: The verse refers to what humans observe throughout their life in this world. They see in themselves that they are needy with respect to every aspect of their existence and every law and property that revolves around it. Therefore, the meaning of the verse is: We created the Children of Adam in the earth, and We differentiated them through birth and procreation. We made them aware of their need and subjugation to Us, and they admitted that, saying: "Yes indeed! We bear witness that You are our Lord."

Based on the above, there are two possible interpretations for: "*Yes indeed! We bear witness.*" (1) It is an expression of their condition and state (called *lisān al-ḥāl*), not something that they literally said. (2) It is a necessary implication of something that they said: They acknowledged that they are needy, and that necessarily implies acknowledging the One Whom they need. The difference between the two is that in the first case, the meaning is deduced from a quality or condition of the person or a thing, even if the that person or thing is unaware of it. For instance, the remnants of a ruined city "speak" of what happened to its people: "The life of this world turned them into its plaything, until they were trampled upon by the galloping of time; thus their peal dropped and their breaths stopped." Another example is how the appearance of a poor person "speaks" of their poverty, need and adversity. In the second case, however, the meaning is deduced from what one says, as its entailment or corollary. Either of these two kinds of speech can interpret the acknowledgment mentioned in the verse: *They said, "Yes indeed! We bear witness."* The first interpretation—that they confessed through *lisān al-ḥāl* (language of condition or state)—is more plausible because the verse is about testimony, which requires a direct and clear statement, not an implication of another statement.[1]

It should be clarified that their witnessing of the scene [implied by "*Yes indeed! We bear witness*"] occurred in the same sense and way that God showed them the scene, implied by: *He made them bear witness over themselves*. He took their acknowledgment through the same "tongue" that He spoke to them. Based on this, we can offer a third way of communication to interpret this witnessing. This is based on the application of "speech"

1 *Lisān al-ḥāl* is what is understood from a person's condition and mode of being. Its opposite is *lisān al-qāl* (language of words), which is when someone actively expresses something, either through sound waves or otherwise. (Trans.)

to God. God's speech is any divine act that reveals God's objectives and intentions. As we have repeatedly discussed, a real [and not metaphorical] sense of God's speech is His act of *ījād* (existentiation, giving existence to something). The connection between the two may not be self-evident at first, but it will become clear with some analysis. Therefore, the question and answer here—*"Am I not your Lord?"* and *"Yes indeed! We bear witness"*—can be interpreted in the light of this mode of communication [through one's purposeful action]. We shall discuss this further below.

Either way, this verse—*When your Lord took from the Children of Adam…*—describes three events: (1) God separated the Children of Adam from one another. (2) He made each of them witness over their self. (3) He took their acknowledgment of His Lordship. The purpose of this witnessing and acknowledgment is then described in the last part of the verse and the following verse: *[This,] lest you should say on the Day of Resurrection, "Indeed we were unaware of this," or lest you should say, "Our fathers ascribed partners [to Allah] before [us] and we were descendants after them. Will You then destroy us because of what the falsifiers have done?"* (7:172-173). People could dispute with God on the Day of Resurrection based on either of these two arguments, had it not been for the above witnessing and acknowledgment of His Lordship. The verse's context shows that now they are left with no argument for associating partners with Him, while He will be fully justified in dooming the violators to hell.

The word "or" (the Arabic particle *aw*) at the beginning of verse 7:173 shows a parallel between the two arguments in these verses. Both are based on the knowledge that results from the above mentioned witnessing, and both are narrated from the Children of Adam who were separated from one another. Upon further reflection on these verses, we can see that these two arguments pertain to two possible alternatives to the above act of witnessing. The two arguments can be elaborated as follows:

(1) *[This,] lest you should say on the Day of Resurrection, "Indeed we were unaware of this"* (7:172). This could be the people's argument against Us had We not taken their testimony *at all*. We took the descendants of the Children of Adam from their loins and made them bear witness over themselves. They acknowledged Our Lordship, and that completed Our proof against them on the Day of Resurrection. Had We not done this at all—that is, had We not made each of them to witness their self and testify that God is their Lord—all of them would have argued against Us

on the Day of Resurrection. They would say that they were unaware of Our Lordship in this life, and unaware individuals are exempt from obligation and rebuke.

(2) *Or lest you should say, "Our fathers ascribed partners [to Allah] before [us] and we were descendants after them. Will You then destroy us because of what the falsifiers have done?"* (7:173). This could be people's argument against Us had We not taken their testimony *partially*. That would be the case if only *some* of them were made witness over themselves, but not others—meaning that only the fathers witnessed this momentous reality, but not their children.[1] In that case, if they associated partners with God, the polytheism of the fathers would be despite their knowledge that their Lord is God alone, and no one else. That would be a sin on their part. Meanwhile, the polytheism of the children would be out of mere conformity in a matter that they had no way of knowing it, whether in detail or in brief. While the fathers would be sinful in associating partners with God—because of their knowledge of the truth—the children simply followed their fathers in their practice. It was the fathers who led their children on the way of polytheism through how they raised and educated them. The children had no way to learn the fact of the matter. How could they know that their fathers erred themselves, and also led them into error? So the descendants could argue against God on the Day of Resurrection, saying that it was the fathers who sinfully associated partners with God and violated the truth. That was an act of the fathers, and they alone should be taken to task. When someone does not know a truth to begin with, they cannot be charged with the duty to observe it, which in turn makes their disobedience meaningless. Hence, the children did not disobey or violate this truth. This means that God would not have a complete argument against the descendants, which would make His argument against the whole humankind incomplete.

Question: This is not a complete picture because the two arguments [at the end of verse 7:172 and in verse 7:173] do not cover all the possible arguments that humankind could present against God. There are two other possibilities that are not covered here: (a) What if only the children were made witness over themselves, but not the fathers? (b) What if only *some*

1 "Fathers" and "children refer to the early and later generations of humankind, respectively. (Trans.)

of the descendants were made witness over themselves [but not all the descendants, and not their ancestors]? This is confirmed by the evolution of human knowledge and civilization, where the subsequent generations inherit what their predecessors have left, and add more to that. Hence, the later generations achieve what the former ones lacked.

Answer: These two cases would also fall under the arguments expressed in these verses. God's argument would still be complete against either all descendants of humankind, or against those of them who witnessed the truth. If some of the ancestors [that is, the early generations] did not witness the truth, it means that they were completely heedless of God's Lordship, so they could not be held responsible for their polytheism. Hence, they could argue by the first statement: *"Indeed we were unaware of this"* (7:172). The second argument is not applicable to them because they were not preceded by others to follow them.

The evolution of human knowledge and civilization pertains to acquired knowledge that humans learn through experience gradually. That is different from one's knowledge of oneself and one's need of a Lord Who manages one's affairs. That kind of knowledge is not empirical, but is present with everyone inherently. It is among our intrinsic cognitions, which are the roots of all other branches of human knowledge. It does not make sense for these types of knowledge to develop after what depends on them. As it has been proven in its place, the gradual development of human knowledge is a result of their inner sense of need [to develop various disciplines].

In short, the two verses are saying that God differentiated between the Children of Adam by taking some of them out of others, and then made them witness over themselves and took their covenant concerning His Lordship. As a result, none of them is unaware of that testimony and their covenant. Hence, neither can they all argue against God on the account of being heedless of it, nor can some of them claim exemption on the account of their fathers having led them into polytheism.

The View of the Opponents of the World of Pre-Existence

Based on the above summary, some exegetes have said that "when" in this verse—*When your Lord took*—refers to our life in this world (*dunyā*). These two verses [7:172-173] describe God's ongoing process of creating humans in this world: He first transfers the seeds of humans from the

loins of their fathers to the wombs of their mothers, and then from there to this world. Then, during their life, He makes them witness over themselves, and shows them the signs of His creation and unity. They witness how they are in need from head to toe, which proves His existence and oneness. This is equivalent to asking them: *"Am I not your Lord?"* To this question, they answer through their mode of being (*lisān al-ḥāl*): "*Yes indeed! We bear witness.*" They effectively admit that "Thou art our Lord, and we have no other lord but Thee!" God does this so that people may not argue with Him on the Day of Resurrection. This way, they cannot claim that they were unaware and did not know Him; or that it was their fathers who associated partners with Him, but the children had no clue about it since they were raised in an environment of *shirk* (association, polytheism) without being responsible for it.

The above mentioned exegetes have rejected a number of narrations which talk about the world of pre-existence (*ʿālam al-dharr*). According to these narrations, there was a realm prior to this world, where God brought out all descendants of Adam from his loin in the form of small atoms (or ants), made them witness themselves, introduced Himself to them, and made a covenant with them concerning His Lordship. That is a decisive proof against them on the Day of Resurrection. The exegetes have rejected these narrations for contravening the apparent meaning of the Qur'an. Their reasons for this are the following:

(1) Were the descendants of Adam who were taken out of his loin intelligent or not? If they were not intelligent beings, then they could not recognize God's unity and be addressed by Him. If they were intelligent beings who are held accountable for a pledge that they gave, then they must remember that scene. A covenant is a decisive proof only when the person remembers it, as the verse explicitly says: *[This,] lest you should say on the Day of Resurrection, "Indeed we were unaware of this"* (7:172). However, we do not remember any prior creation to our existence here in this world. Hence, what is meant in the verse can only pertain to what we comprehend in this world, and that is the need we find in ourselves to a Lord Who owns us and manages our affairs. That is the Lord of all things.

(2) It is not possible for a large number of rational beings to forget something, to the extent that not even a single one of them remembers it. The lapse between this life and the claimed world of pre-existence is not longer than the lapse between this world and the next, where the

inhabitants of paradise and hell will remember what they went through in this world, as we can see in several verses such as: *One of them will say, "Indeed I had a companion…"* (37:51); *And they say, "What is the matter with us that we do not see [here] men whom we used to count among the bad ones?"* (38:62).

Besides, if it is possible for such a large number of individuals to forget, then it is also possible that our current life is a reincarnation following a previous round of existence where we were charged with certain obligations to follow. We do not remember this, but we are going through the consequences of our actions in our previous life [that is, our karma]. This is the same as the theory of transmigration (*tanāsukh*), which interprets the hereafter as the passing of the soul from one body to another through rebirth.[1]

(3) The narrations talk about the loin of *Adam*, but the verse talks about the loin of *the Children of Adam*. The verse says *their loins* and *their descendants* [in plural], not "his loin" and "his descendants." Therefore, the verse apparently does not include Adam's immediate progeny. Moreover, the verses say that God did this so that they may not say *on the Day of Resurrection, "Indeed we were unaware of this,"* or that *"Our fathers ascribed partners [to Allah] before [us] and we were descendants after them…"* (7:172-173). These statements show that the descendants in this verse had fathers who were polytheists.

Based on this, some scholars have said that these verses include only *some* of Adam's descendants, not *all* of them. They exclude Adam, his immediate children, all believers, and those polytheists whose fathers were not polytheists. Therefore, the verses only apply to those polytheists who were born to polytheist parents.

(4) The world of pre-existence was presumably a realm where all humankind was gathered together as a single whole. This contradicts the idea that *"Our fathers ascribed partners [to Allah]"* (7:173), which shows that they had polytheist fathers.

(5) Some exegetes have accepted these narrations as authentic, but not as an interpretation of the verse. Instead these narrations pertain to how God fashioned humankind before their appearance in this world:

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1 This point is raised as an objection because reincarnation is against the apparent Qur'anic view of afterlife. (Trans.)

He hard-wired them to know His Lordship. Hence, these narrations fall in the same category as narrations which say that "All humans are born with a divine intuition and a monotheistic nature (*fiṭrah*)." Similarly, it is said that children [who die before puberty] will be in a blissful state in paradise because of their belief in God in the world of pre-existence.

Meanwhile, the verse has nothing to do with the message of these narrations. The central theme of the verse is that God did this so that the people would not argue with Him on the Day of Resurrection, saying that they *were unaware of this*. If the verse were about what He did to them in the world of pre-existence, then they would still have a case against God. They could argue: "Our Lord, it is true that You showed us ourselves when You took us out of Adam's loin, and that we were certain about Your Lordship just as we are today—on the Day of Resurrection—but You made us forget that scene during our life in the world, which was the place of religious obligation and action. You left us to our own intellects to discover Your Lordship independently. Thus, those of us who could prove Your Lordship intellectually accepted it; and those of us who could not, did not. Both groups followed the rule of their reason. So what is our sin in all this? You took away from us the memory of that witnessing, and instead equipped us with a faculty whose job is to reason, which may either hit or miss."

(6) There is no clear connection between the verse and what is found in the narrations because the scene depicted in the verse could be a symbolic illustration. The narrations [which imply a literal occurrence of such a testimony in a previous world] are not authoritative because their chain of transmission is either unconnected (called *marfūʿ*) or they end with the Prophet's Companions (called *mawqūf*).

The above list was a summary of the arguments of some scholars concerning the purport of the verse and the validity of the narrations.

The Response of the Proponents

The proponents of the world of pre-existence (*ʿālam al-dharr*)—which include the majority of the scholars of hadith, and some exegetes—have given some responses to these arguments. Here is a summary of their answers to the above points:

(1) The fact that humans have forgotten the scene and its details does not harm the validity of God's proof against them. What is problematic is

if the covenant is *entirely* lost, which means that people forget God's oneness as their Lord. This, however, is not forgotten and is never effaced from their souls. That suffices for a binding contract. For instance, suppose you want to make an agreement with Zayd, so you invite him to your house, treat him with honor, and discuss the advantages and disadvantages of the situation with him as much as you can. You go through all the details together, and he signs the agreement with you. Then he is responsible for his agreement as long as he remembers its overall occurrence, even though he may forget coming to your house and all the details that transpired between you at that time.

(2) There is no logical impossibility for a large number of rational beings to forget something. Rather, it is only a matter of unlikelihood [which does not equate impossibility]. Moreover, as stated in the previous answer, the basic knowledge of God's Lordship is not forgotten, and that is sufficient for humankind's responsibility. Also, if one admits that people may have forgotten what occurred to them prior to this life, it does not *prove* the theory of *tanāsukh* (transmigration, reincarnation). There are other problems that disprove that theory, which have been discussed in its place. Overall, there is no proof for claiming that it is *impossible* for people to forget the events of one realm when they move to another.

(3) The verse also includes the immediate progeny of Adam. The verse's expression—*When your Lord took from the Children of Adam*—is sufficient to show this, because it clearly means that first Adam's immediate children were taken out of his loin, and then their children were in turn taken out of their loins, and so on until the last descendants. This is just like the sequence of generations in this world, which occurs through procreation and birth. Al-Rāzī has responded to this differently: the narrations talk about the extraction of Adam's *immediate* children from *his* loin, and the verse talks about the extraction of *their* children from *their* loins. Hence, the verse and the narrations build on each other and complete the picture.[1]

The narrations which talk about Adam's immediate children—that God took them out of Adam's loin and made a covenant with them—do not intend to interpret the text of the verse, but they serve to elaborate on the story. Therefore, one cannot refute them on the account of being inconsistent with the Qur'an or contradictory to it.

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1 The problem with al-Rāzī's explanation should be clear. (Auth.)

There is also a problem with scholars who have limited the verse's application to those individuals whose fathers were polytheists. They have excluded Adam's immediate children, and anyone whose father was not a polytheist, from the verse's scope. This is based on the assumption that the verse is only meant as an argument against the polytheists, intended to strip them of the claim that *"Our fathers ascribed partners [to Allah]."* They have concluded this restriction of application because only the polytheists would make this argument, not all individuals. However, these scholars have missed the purpose of the verse, because the claim is ascribed to all people as a general and overall statement, not as a claim that every one of them would make individually. The meaning is: Had We not done so, then all of you *could* argue, if they were to be punished on the Day of Resurrection: "I did not associate partners, but those who were before me did so, and I was only a descendant and follower of them, not a leader myself."

(4) The answer to the fourth problem should be clear based on the above. The verse and the narrations imply that God separated the parents and their children in that realm of pre-existence, then He returned them again to the state of being together as a single whole.

(5) This is against the apparent purport of some narrations, and against the explicit text of others. As for the problem of forgetting the covenant, it was answered under number (1).

(6) The apparent sense (*ẓāhir*) of a statement is authoritative; it does not have to be direct or explicit (*taṣrīḥ*). Just because one can interpret something symbolically does not *prove* that it *should* be interpreted as such. We can opt for a symbolic meaning only if there is an obstacle to interpreting the text based on its apparent meaning. In this case, we explained that there is no such obstacle.

As for the claim that these narrations are weak and unreliable: that is not true. Among them there are also authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) and reliable (*muwaththaq*) narrations in terms of transmission.[1]

The above was a summary of the debate over the world of pre-existence in the light of this verse, including the views of those who accept and defend it, and those who reject and doubt it. However, upon adequate

1 We shall present these in our examination of narrations below, by God's will. (Auth.)

contemplation on the verse and the narrations, and on the arguments of the proponents and opponents, we are led in a different direction than what the two groups have disagreed upon.

Examining the View of the Proponents

In short, here is the view of those who have accepted the narrations about the world of pre-existence, and have used them to interpret the verse:

When God created Adam in the form of a complete man, He extracted his seed from his loin—the seed that later turned into his progeny. Ho took that out of him, and then again extracted parts of that seed which would later become its children. He separated the essential parts of each seed from the parts that would later grow into its children. Thus He continued sequentially until the very last part that would become another human being. In other words, God took out Adam's seed—which was the main material for humankind—and then divided it consecutively and indefinitely, such that every human being was separated and distinguished from that seed. That resulted in a countless number of dispersed particles.

At that point—or before that—God made each particle into a complete human: exactly the same as the person that the initial particle would grow to be in this world. The part that would later become Zayd, was the very Zayd there; and the part that would later become ʿAmr, was the very ʿAmr there. God gave them life and consciousness, and equipped them with the means of hearing and speech. He enabled them to understand meanings, and to choose to either disclose or conceal them. Then He introduced Himself to them. He spoke to them and they responded positively. They all acknowledged His Lordship, some of them in accordance to what they genuinely held in their hearts, and some of them contrary to that.

After making this covenant with them, God returned them to their original position in the loins recursively, until they were all gathered again in Adam's loin, while still retaining their knowledge of God's Lordship, even though they may have forgotten the scene of the witnessing and the making of the covenant. These individuals are really existent in the loins of their fathers until they are permitted to enter the world. They come to this world carrying with themselves their initial knowledge of God's Lordship. That is their own verdict that they have a Lord based on observing in themselves a need for Someone Who owns them and directs their affairs.

This is what the proponents of the world of pre-existence have understood from the narrations and the verse, and that is what they wish to prove. However, this is logically impossible, and is also rejected by the Qur'an and hadith without a doubt. How could they prove that a single part of Zayd—which is one of his particles that was transmitted from Adam's loin to his son, and from his loin to his son, and so on consecutively until it reached Zayd—is the same as Zayd himself? How could that particle be proven to have cognition, consciousness, hearing, sight and heart? How could that particle be charged with religious obligations, covenants and commitments? How could it be held accountable for God's arguments that are addressed to it? How could Zayd be rewarded or penalized based on that particle's covenant? Based on both rational proof and scriptural evidence, the reality of a human being is something beyond the person's material substance. It is one's soul which is created with the creation of one's body in this world. We had some discussion on this topic before.[1]

Moreover, it is proven [in logic] that all statements (*taṣdīqāt*) hinge upon a set of concepts (*taṣawwurāt*). This includes both statements that are self-evident (*badīhiyyāt*) and the ones that are derived (*naẓariyyāt*), including the admittance that one has a Lord Who owns them and directs their affairs. The concepts are themselves acquired through inner and outer sensations, which both hinge on having a compound material being. This is the case of all acquired knowledge of humans, one of which is the statement that there is a Lord Who takes care of one's needs.

The verse is clearly saying that the witnessing and the covenant were meant to complete God's argument against humankind. Now, there are two conditions that come into play here: (1) The other side must be intelligent. (2) The other side must recognize their Lord [through feeling a need in themselves]. If both conditions are required for the completeness of God's argument, then the above notion of the world of pre-existence suffers from the fact that the particles lose their intellect once they return to their original position in the loins, until they appear again in this world. Even if they retain their intellect all the way through the loins and wombs, they must lose it upon their birth, and lack it until they reach the age of reason. This undermines God's argument against humankind. And if we

1 See volume 2 (1st ed.), pp. 201ff of the English translation, under verses 2:153-157. (Trans.)

claim that only the second condition—of knowledge of the Lord—is sufficient for the completeness of God's argument, then there would be no need for a world of pre-existence, because that condition can be met by the view of those who have rejected these narrations.[1]

Alternatively, we can imagine three possibilities here:

(1) God's argument hinges on all of what happened in that realm—including the witnessing, the recognition, and the covenant.

Comment: The problem with this view is that then God's argument would fall short with the forgetting of any of these. We have forgotten the scene of our witnessing, God's speech with us, and the making of the covenant.

(2) If God's argument hinges only on the knowledge of His Lordship. The other events—the witnessing and the covenant—were rather meant to establish this knowledge. But once the knowledge is there, God's argument does not depend on them anymore.

Comment: The problem with this view is that it means that everyone is accountable to God's argument and covenant, including fetuses, infants, the mentally retarded, and the ignorant. This is against both rational and scriptural evidence.

(3) The knowledge of God's Lordship becomes complete and binding only once one matures and develops rationally. This occurred in the world of pre-existence, whereby God's argument became complete against the individuals. Then the conditions of maturity and reason receded, leaving the knowledge as an insufficient proof. Then, whoever matures and develops rationally in this world, God's argument is made complete against them for a second time.

Comment: The problem with this view is that just as one develops rationally in this world through certain means and instruments, one's knowledge of God's Lordship can also develop through worldly channels and experiences. One's rational faculty—that is, one's power of distinction between good and bad—grows through the repeated occurrence of various events, and through consistent practice and experience in life. This is a gradual process and continuum with perfection of the intellect at one end, and its utter weakness at the other. A similar paradigm can be held to

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1 Their view is that one's need to a Lord is a kind of knowledge that is present with everyone inherently. (Trans.)

be true for knowledge of God's Lordship: we acquire it gradually through certain means and channels, just as we develop our rational faculty. In that case, why should there be another realm of existence prior to this world to complete God's argument? What purpose does that serve when God's argument would be complete even in its absence?

Not to mention that the type of reason applicable in this discussion is *practical reason*. That is a faculty that we acquire in this world through experiencing social life, good and bad occurrences, emotional excitements, and inner stimulations to acquire what is beneficial and avoid what is harmful. As a result of these feelings and experiences, we make voluntary and calculated movements, where sometimes we hit and sometimes we miss. Then gradually we grow and become more competent in distinguishing right from wrong, good from bad, and benefit from harm. That is the kind of reason that is needed for the validity of being a witness to something or making a covenant. However, the world of pre-existence is not a realm to develop such practical reason, because it lacks the required conditions and bases for it.

One could possibly assume that the world of pre-existence was indeed a place for practical reason, and had all the required conditions and foundations for it. In fact, the discussions of the proponents of the world of pre-existence show that they accepted this assumption, relying on the apparent meaning of the narrations. Some narrations say that "God called all descendants of Adam to monotheism. They all responded positively: some of them in accordance to what they genuinely held in their hearts, and some of them contrary to that because they held disbelief deep inside. Furthermore, God raised among them some prophets and saints; some people accepted their call, while others rejected it." The proponents have presented and discussed these narrations in detail. In short, anything that occurs in this world also occurred in that realm. If so, then that would prove another physical world prior to ours, much like the theory of "cycles of creation" (*al-adwār wa al-akwār*).[1] This in turn requires a prior world of pre-existence to complete God's argument against the inhabitants of that world, because that world would be no different than our current life. If

1 This is the view that all events are the effects of the rotational movements of the firmaments (*aflāk*). It takes the sphere of fixed stars (called *falak al-thawābit*) 360 thousand years to complete its cycle. In every cycle of it, the events in this world occur again exactly as they did in the last round. (Auth.)

our current world requires a prior world for witnessing and acknowledging God, then that world would itself require a similar previous world, for there is no difference between them in essence. Otherwise, God's proof would remain incomplete.

Here is another problem with the theory of the world of pre-existence: the theory assumes that for us to know God in this world, there must have been another realm where we had a different form of existence—in the form of atoms—and where the witnessing and the covenant took place. That is required for the realization of our knowledge of God's Lordship. This assumption is universal in terms of its application: it equally applies to all humans, including Adam and Eve. However, Adam and Eve did not have an "atomic existence" prior to this world to achieve a knowledge of God's Lordship [because they were never in the loins of another person]. So how come they are exempted from the universal application of this assumption? If it is because of their virtue, then among their descendants were some individuals who were better and more virtuous than them. One may say that they were exempted because their creation was already complete, so they could know God without having to go through the process of atomic existence. If so, then each of their descendants would also have a complete creation in its due time. They could similarly realize knowledge of God's Lordship after being born in this world and reaching maturity. Why should this knowledge be realized prior to their full creation?

The above problems pertain to the view that humans had an atomic existence prior to this world, as understood from some narrations. There is no way to dodge these problems, nor can we interpret the verse according to this notion. It is common among the scholars of hadith to deduce a certain meaning from some narration, and then impose it on the Qur'an as the meaning of the verse, without investigating whether the text of the verse is conducive to that meaning or not. That is assuming the narration to be authentic. Even if we want to adopt this approach, we cannot apply it in this case, because authentic narrations, just like the Qur'anic verses, would never offer something impossible.

This concludes our discussion with the proponents of the world of pre-existence. We also have the literalists (*al-ḥashwiyyāh*) and some scholars of hadith who hold no authority for the reason and rational necessity against the narrations. They accept solitary reports (called *āḥād* and *khabar al-wāḥid*) even with respect to the fundamental beliefs, which can

only be based on certainty. We have no discussion with this group.

Examining the View of the Opponents

Now we shall examine the view of the opponents of the world of pre-existence. They claim that the verse describes the current state of human beings throughout their life in this world. God brings out the people from the loins and wombs of their parents, until they appear as separate individuals. He equips them with what they need to recognize His Lordship and their need of Him. Since He makes them realize how they are immersed in need and weakness, it is *as though* He is asking them, *"Am I not your Lord?"* And as they hear this question, they admit: *"Yes indeed! We bear witness."* All this conversation is through the language of condition or state (*lisān al-ḥāl*). God does this in order to complete His proof and to cut off their argument against Him, because now they know. This way they cannot bring the excuse that they were unaware of this. This covenant runs through the entire course of this world. As long as time persists and human life continues, people are bound by this covenant.

One problem here is that this interpretation is not consonant with the apparent meaning and theme of the verse. The verse begins with *When* (idh) *your Lord took*. The word *idh* indicates the temporal container of an event, and is especially used for past events. Sometimes it is also used for future events that are certain. For instance, God says: *And when* (idh) *Allah will say, "O Jesus son of Mary! Was it you who said to the people…"* (5:116) up to the verse: *Allah will say, "This is a day when their truthfulness shall benefit the truthful"* (5:119). The word *idh* (when) in verse 5:116 indicates a future temporal container; it is used for a future event because its occurrence is definite.[1]

The verse is addressed to the Prophet. Or perhaps it is addressed to the Prophet and others, since it uses the second person plural at the end: *[This,] lest you should say* (taqūlū) *on the Day of Resurrection…* It is addressed to all inhabitants of this world. We are the audience of these verses in our current state of existence. Based on the above view [held by the opponent of the world of pre-existence], the conversation narrated in these verses also takes place in this world, throughout the duration of

1 Verses 5:116 and 5:119 also use the verb *qāla* in the past tense, meaning "said" not "will say." This is in conformity with the use of *idh*, and also indicates certainty. (Trans.)

human existence in this life. This is inconsistent with the use of the word *idh*, because this word indicates an event that occurred *before* the current address of the verse. And there is no other consideration to vouchsafe the use of the term here, because it is not about a definite future event or anything like that.

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Our View

When your Lord took from the Children of Adam, from their loins, their descendants: We can deduce two points from this expression: (1) On the one hand, it matches what we observe in this world. The verse talks about God's creation of humankind, where each person issues from another, and a small number [of early ancestors] proliferates into a multitude. This is how the individuals come to existence successively, and also how the species is maintained through the continuation of its members. (2) Nevertheless, this expression also indicates some sense of precedence. It implies something "prior" to our current course of creation that is readily observable to us.

This precedence cannot be temporal, as we discussed above. Temporal precedence to this world means that God took out from the first human being his seed which would later evolve into all humanity, differentiated it into as many particles as the number of individuals who would come to existence, and then gave every one of them the exact same properties of life, intellect, hearing, sight, heart, back and stomach. All these developments occurred before their natural course. Then He showed Himself to them and took their covenant, and then He returned them to their positions in the loins so that they may complete their natural course there until they come to life in this world. As we explained, this is impossible, and the verse does not support this notion. The reason why this is impossible is that it necessitates every person to exist twice in this world. It entails a worldly existence and personality prior to another worldly existence and personality for every individual.[1] This means that every person would at the same time be themself and other than themself. All the problems we discussed above [concerning the common notion of the world of

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1 This is different from the concept of multiple personalities as used in psychology and ethics. (Auth.)
The author's discussion is about ontological or existential personality, not psychological or ethical. (Trans.)

pre-existence] reduce to this contradiction.

It is possible for a human being—or any other being—to exist in multiple realms as part of its journey toward God. This is actually confirmed by the Qur'an, contrary to the disbelievers' claim: *There is nothing but the life of this world: we live and we die, and nothing but time destroys us* (45:24). God affirms another life for humans—and other beings—on the Day of Resurrection, where each person will be the same person as in this world, but in a different realm with different laws and properties than this world. He also affirms another life for humans in the world of *barzakh* (the intermediate realm between this life and the Resurrection), which is governed by different laws and properties than this world, although the individuals there will be the same as the individuals in this world.

Furthermore, God says: *There is not a thing but that its stores are with Us, and We do not send it down except in a known measure* (15:21). This verse says that everything has another existence in the stores of God; an existence which is vast and not yet measured out. It becomes determined and delimited when God sends it to this world. For instance, the human world, notwithstanding its vastness, has another existence with God in His stores, which takes precedence to its existence in this world. What exists here is a result of that higher and prior existence descending to this world.

The existence of all beings in this world—including humankind—is gradual and subject to time and change. Yet, this gradual existence is itself granted by God immediately and instantaneously, through the divine command, "Be!" (*kun*). This notion is found in several verses, such as: *All His command, when He wills something, is to say to it "Be," and it is. So glory be to Him in Whose hand is the kingdom of all things* (36:82-83); *And Our command is but a single [word], like the twinkling of an eye* (54:50). This means that this world and all things in it have two aspects: (1) They have a worldly aspect by which they face the world. This aspect of their existence is governed by time and change: they progress gradually from potentiality to actuality, and from non-being to being. They grow from imperfection step by step until they reach their perfection, then they die and return to their Lord. (2) They have a divine aspect by which they face God. This is a non-temporal and non-gradual existence that they have. Their divine aspect possesses all its properties timelessly, without going through the stages of perfection from potentiality to actualization. This aspect is different from the first one, although they are two sides of the

same coin. The two aspects are not governed by the same laws. It requires fine intellectual ability to imagine and comprehend this second aspect of all things. We had some discussion on it previously, and we shall elaborate on it more below, by God's will.[1]

These verses [concerning the divine aspect of things] indicate that the human world, notwithstanding its vastness and extension, has an assembled and concentrated existence with God. This is the aspect by which humanity faces God, and through which God bestows gradual worldly existence on every member of humankind. In that divine aspect, no individual is absent from another; nor are they absent from their Lord; nor is He absent from them. After all, how could the act be absent from its actor? How could something manufactured be absent from its manufacturer?[2] This is what God calls *malakūt* (God's kingdom, angelic world) in the verse: *Thus did We show Abraham the kingdom* (malakūt) *of the heavens and the earth, that he might be of those who possess certitude* (6:75). He also refers to the same concept where He says: *No indeed! Were you to know with knowledge of certainty, you would surely see hell. Again, you will surely see it with the eye of certainty* (102:5-7).

What we observe in this world is the worldly aspect of humankind. That is where individuals are separated from one another, and their conditions and experiences are diversified as they are spread over time and space, and become subject to the passing of nights and days. That is where people are veiled from their Lord because of orienting themselves toward worldly objectives and sensual pleasures. This aspect is subsequent to the first aspect, and a result of that. The relation between our divine aspect and our worldly aspect is the relation between "Be!" (*kun*) and "it is" (*yakūnu*)

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1 The author discussed this under verse 7:54. See the section titled "The Meaning of Creation (*Khalq*) and Command (*Amr*)" in volume 15 of the English translation. (Trans.)

2 What is meant here is causation in its ontological sense. It means giving existence (*wujūd*) to an individual, object or occurrence (called *ījād*). Metaphysically speaking, real action and true manufacturing mean effusing existence upon a certain event. The only source of this can be the Absolute Existence (that is, God), and that event can never be separated or veiled from this Source. (Trans.)

in the verse: *that He says to it "Be," and it is* (36:82).[1]

Human existence in this world is preceded by another existence in a different realm, which was nevertheless as humane, but with the difference that all individuals exist there together, and are not veiled from their Lord. They witness Him as their sole Lord through witnessing themselves. Their knowledge of His Lordship is not because of rational argumentation [which rests on the faculties of reason that develop gradually in this life], but because they are never cut off from Him and never fail to find Him. That is why they acknowledge Him and any truth that is from Him. The defilements of polytheism and sin belong to our life in this world, not the other realm, because the only acts and effects in that realm are those of God, which are sustained by Him existentially. The reader should reflect on this.

If you contemplate thoroughly about these verses [concerning the divine aspect of things], and then turn to the current verse of discussion—*When your Lord took from the Children of Adam, from their loins, their descendants* (7:172)—and reflect on it well, you will realize that the current verse is really an elaboration of what is stated concisely in the other verses. It talks about another plane of human existence, where God separated and differentiated all humans from one another, then He *made them bear witness over themselves, [He said to them,] "Am I not your Lord?" They said, "Yes indeed! We bear witness"* (7:172).

This interpretation of the verse is immune from the above mentioned problems that apply to what is commonly held concerning the world of pre-existence, as the proponents have understood from the narrations. Our interpretation is deduced from other verses of the Qur'an, and it does not propose a temporal sequence or separation between the two realms. Our divine existence encompasses our worldly existence, and the two are inseparable. The divine plane of human existence precedes their worldly existence not by temporal precedence, but by the kind of precedence that is found in the verse: *"Be," and it is* (36:82).

Similarly, our interpretation is secure from the problems that we raised against the opponents' view. They proposed that the verse is only

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1 The imperative *kun* is a one-time command that transcends time. *Yakūnu* means temporal and gradual becoming, since the verb is in the present tense, which implies continuity. Also, the letter *fā'* (so, therefore, then) before *yakūnu* shows that the latter is a consequence and result of the former. (Trans.)

concerned with our current life in this world. The problems with this view are: (1) The word *idh* (when) implies a preceding plane of existence. (2) It interprets "witnessing" metaphorically as "getting to know" [through rational development]. (3) It proposes that the narrated conversations in the verse—*"Am I not your Lord?" They said, "Yes indeed! We bear witness"*—are descriptions of our condition and state (*lisān al-ḥāl*). In our interpretation, however: (1) The word *idh* refers to a preceding stage. (2) "Witnessing" maintains its original and literal meaning. (3) The addresses in the verse are real.[1]

In addition, one cannot object that this meaning is foreign to the verse and imposed on it, because: (1) there is nothing in the verse to reject this idea; and (2) it is deduced from putting other verses of the Qur'an next to one another.

As with the narrations, we shall discuss them below. Overall, some narrations go only as far as the verse: they simply assert that there is another plane of human existence. There are also some narrations which say that God disclosed that plane of human existence to Adam. God showed Adam the divine aspect (*malakūt*) of our current world, including the witnessing and covenant which occur in it. Hence, Adam had a similar experience to Abraham, who was shown the divine aspect (*malakūt*) of the heavens and the earth.[2]

Back to the Verse

When your Lord took…: There is an implicit verb "remind" (*uhdkur*, in the imperative mood) at the beginning of the verse. Those being

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1 That is, they denote an ongoing and inseparable relation between the Actor and His acts. (Trans.)

2 The Qur'an has used *malakūt* and *mulk* synonymously, meaning "kingdom, sovereignty, dominion." The distinction between the two was developed later in Islamic metaphysics and theoretical mysticism, where *malakūt* is a locus of timeless realities, while *mulk* is the world of temporal phenomena. In terms of Qur'anic usage, *malakūt* is always annexed to something: the *malakūt* of everything (23:88, 36:83), or the *malakūt* of the heavens and the earth (6:75, 7:185). Similarly, the Qur'an talks about the *mulk* of the heavens and the earth (and whatever is between them), and also uses al-mulk in an unconditional form, with the article *al-*. Therefore, we can conclude that according to the Qur'an, everything has some *malakūt* and also has some *mulk*, but the contrast and contradistinction between the two is extra-Qur'anic. (Trans.)

reminded are either the People of the Book, in continuation of the previous discourse; or all people in general, in line with the theme and message of the entire chapter. The meaning is: Remind them—the People of the Book or all people—that God made a covenant with the people, and He will certainly hold them accountable for it. Most people do not live up to their covenant although they have no excuse for this.

More elaborately: Remind them that there was a plane of existence prior to this worldly plane, where *your Lord took from the Children of Adam, from their loins, their descendants*. Every individual appeared there as an independent person, distinct from others. All humans were all gathered there individually. God showed them their very essence and reality which is directly tied to their Lord: *descendants and He made them bear witness over themselves*. They were not veiled from Him, but observed Him as their Lord.

This is not something exclusive to humans, but every being finds its Lord within itself and without a veil. There are many verses in the Qur'an which imply this, such as: *There is not a thing but celebrates His praise, but you do not understand their glorification* (17:44). This is a matter of conscience and intuition (*fiṭrah*).

At that level of existence, people understand that God is showing them this reality [of their connection and need of Himself] because He wants them to acknowledge His Lordship and commit themselves to this covenant. That is why the conversation narrated in the verse—*[He said to them,] "Am I not your Lord?" They said, "Yes indeed! We bear witness"*—is real speech by both sides, not merely a description of the state and condition there (*lisān al-ḥāl*). What we mean by "real speech" is the transmission of a certain intended meaning from one side to the other side.[1]

… [This,] lest you should say on the Day of Resurrection, "Indeed we were unaware of this": This statement is addressed to the same audience as in *"Am I not your Lord?"* who then replied: *"Yes indeed! We bear witness."* In that plane of existence, the people literally observe that they are made

1 In this context, what marks "real speech" from *lisān al-ḥāl* (language of condition or state) is that the former is intended and conscious, while the latter is not. *Lisān al-ḥāl* is a meaning that can be observed in a person or thing even if that person or thing is unaware of it. That would be a metaphorical speech. Real speech is a meaning that one expresses intentionally and consciously, whether verbally or otherwise. (Trans.)

witness over themselves, that God speaks to them, and that they respond to Him with admission. Throughout their life in this world, they are only aware of knowledge through mental derivation and rational arguments; they are unaware of the kind of knowledge they realized in that preceding realm. Nevertheless, when the carpet of this world is rolled up on the Day of Resurrection, these veils and occupations will be cleared away, and they will reclaim their original view and observation. At that point they will remember what transpired between them and their Lord.

Another possibility is that the last part of the verse [*lest you should say…*] is addressed to all of us who are the audience of the verse [not to the witnesses in the higher realm]. The meaning would be: "We did that to the Children of Adam so that you people may not say on the Day of Resurrection…" The first interpretation is more apparent, and is confirmed by another recitation of the verse which reads the verb in the third person instead of the second person: *an yaqūlū* (lest *they* should say…).[1]

أَوْ تَقُولُوا إِنَّما أَشْرَكَ آباؤُنا مِنْ قَبْلُ وَ كُنَّا ذُرِّيَّةً مِنْ بَعْدِهِمْ أَ فَتُهْلِكُنا بِما فَعَلَ

1 Imagine a mirror that is facing the sun. The mirror happens to be conscious and intelligent, such that it can bend over itself and see within. If it were to be asked, "Look inside yourself; what do you see?" it would say, "I see the sun reflecting inside me." A mirror, inasmuch as being a mirror, only reflects what it faces, not some essence or identity of its own. We humans are such mirrors. And in our state of pristine nature (*fiṭrah*), we are neither disoriented from the sun of reality, nor covered by dusts of illusion and desires. But then we develop a sense of self and identity that covers our true emptiness. Otherwise, the sun is always there, shining on all mirrors indiscriminately. This analogy, with some elaborations, was inspired by some of the author's students and exponents concerning the current verse. For more insight on this topic, see the author's *al-Rasāʾil al-tawḥidiyyah, Rasāʾil al-insān* and *Risālat al-wilāyah*. Meanwhile, it should be noted that when the Qur'an uses the word *shahādah* (witnessing) with the preposition *ʿalá* (over, against), it does not necessarily imply seeing and vision, whether physical or spiritual. Instead, it is meant in a forensic sense. Being witness *ʿalá* (over, against) someone means serving as evidence that would prove their responsibility. In the current verse, it means that God took the people's testimony about His Lordship and made them acknowledge their duty to not associate partners with Him. Whether this involved some vision or not is secondary to the meaning. (Trans.)

الْمُبْطِلُونَ ﴿١٧٣﴾

(7:173) ***or lest you should say, "Our fathers ascribed partners [to Allah] before [us] and we were descendants after them. Will You then destroy us because of what the falsifiers have done?"***

The final part of the previous verse describes people's potential argument against God if He had not conducted the scenario of witnessing and covenant with anyone whatsoever. This verse describes the people's potential argument against God, had He done so only with the fathers, while leaving out their children and the later generations.

Here we are talking about a plane of existence where there is no barrier between the individuals and their Lord. That is a plane of knowing God directly, which is exactly what is meant by witnessing one's essence and pledging a covenant with one's Lord. If there is no witnessing of one's reality and no covenant at that level, then there cannot be any knowledge of God's Lordship in this world *a fortiori*, because our knowledge of God here is from behind a veil. We only have indirect knowledge of God in this life, through reasoning. If the children are not included in the witnessing and covenant on that plane, then they would have no way whatsoever to recognize God as their Lord in this world. Hence, they could no longer be called "sinners" for resorting to other gods. Since they would lack that underlying vision and intuition, the only way available to them would be to follow their fathers and adopt their *shirk* (polytheism, association). That is why they could argue: *"Our fathers ascribed partners [to Allah] before [us] and we were descendants after them. Will You then destroy us because of what the falsifiers have done?"*

وَ كَذٰلِكَ نُفَصِّلُ الْآيَاتِ وَ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَرْجِعُونَ ﴿١٧٤﴾

(7:174) ***Thus do We elaborate*** **(nufaṣṣilu, from tafṣīl)** ***the*** *communications,* ***and so that they may come back.***

The elaboration of the signs and verses (*tafṣīl al-āyāt*) means separating and distinguishing them from each other, so that the meaning of each becomes clear, and they are not confused with one another.

… and so that they may come back: The conjunction "and" shows that there is some other purpose that is not mentioned here. The implied meaning is: "We elaborate Our communications for some lofty objectives,

and also so that they may return from falsehood to the truth."[1]

Examining Narrations

(1) Imam al-Bāqir said: When God was about to create people, He created two waters: one potable, the other salty and bitter. The two waters mixed with each other. Then He took some dust from the crust of the earth, and scrubbed it hard. Then He addressed the People of the Right, while they were creeping like ants: "To paradise, and I do not give a hoot"; and He addressed the People of the Left:[2] "To hell, and I do not give a hoot!" Then He said,

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1 The covenant is also a central concept in the Bible. However, the Qur'anic covenant presented in this verse, and in verses 36:60-61 and 57:8, is more universal and eternal. It is a covenant of oneness that God has made primordially with all humankind inherently. Our task is to see the light before seeing what is illuminated by it; to notice the reality of existence, in its absoluteness and infinitude, manifesting itself in a myriad of colorful expressions; to not get distracted from the kernel by the covering shell; to penetrate the foams and waves on the surface, and rest in the calm core of the ocean.

"*Yes indeed! We bear witness*" (7:172) is reminiscent of a statement that is commonly narrated from Imam ʿAlī: "I did not see anything except that I saw God before it." While the ascription of this statement to the Imam is incorrect, it bears a profound meaning and describes a purely monotheistic world view. The statement is complete without the addition of "and with it, and after it" in some versions, because God's togetherness with all things, and His encompassment of everything, is neither physical nor temporal. In fact, the addition could undermine the meaning, because seeing God with something implies parallelism, and seeing God *after* something means that the thing is more apparent than the Truth.

In short, living up to our eternal covenant with the Absolute can be expressed by these lines by Shabistarī in *Gulshan-i rāz*,:

For the one who's awakened to oneness in seeing,
The first thing to witness is the light of being.
If the heart is illumined and polished from façade,
The first thing that it sees, before anything, is God.

(Trans.)

2 The People of the Right and the People of the Left are defined and described in Chapter 56 (Sūrah al-Wāqiʿah). (Trans.)

"Am I not your Lord?" They said, "Yes indeed! We bear witness." [This,] lest you should say on the Day of Resurrection, "Indeed we wereunaware of this" (7:172)…[1]

(2) ʿAbd-Allāh b. Sinān says: Once I asked Imam al-Ṣādiq about the verse, *the origination* (fiṭrah) *of Allah according to which He originated humankind* (30:30): "What is this *fiṭrah* (primal nature, innate disposition, initial makeup)?" He said, "It means submission (*islām*). When God took their covenant, He shaped them according to monotheism (*tawḥīd*), as He said: *Am I not your Lord?* (7:172). That [covenant] included[2] both the believers and the disbelievers."[3]

(3) Once Ibn al-Kawwāʾ went to Imam ʿAlī and said, "Tell me about God, O Commander of the Faithful. Did He speak to any human being before Moses?" The Imam responded, "God spoke to all of His servants, including the good-doers and the evil-doers, and they replied back." Ibn al-Kawwāʾ found this difficult to handle and understand. "How did that happen, O Commander of the Faithful?"

The Imam explained: "Haven't you read in the Book of God, where He says to His Prophet: *When your Lord took from the Children of Adam, from their loins, their descendants and He made them bear witness over themselves, [He said to them,] 'Am I not your Lord?' They said, 'Yes indeed'* (7:172)? As you can see, Ibn al-Kawwāʾ, He made them hear His speech, and they responded to Him, where He says: *They said, 'Yes indeed'* (7:172). Then He proclaimed, 'Indeed I am Allah! There is no god but Me, and I am the All-Merciful, the Ever-Merciful.' There they acknowledged His right of obedience and Lordship. He also singled out the messengers, the prophets, and their successors, and ordered everyone to obey them. They also admitted that as part of their covenant. When they acknowledged this, the angels said: '*We bear*

1 *Al-Kāfī*, via its chain of narration, on the authority of Zurārah, on the authority of Ḥumrān.

2 An alternative manuscript says, "they included." (Auth.)

3 *Al-Kāfī*, via its chain of narration.

witness—over you, O Children of Adam[1]—*lest you should say on the Day of Resurrection, "Indeed we were unaware of this"* (7:172).'"[2]

Author's comment: As we explained above, the above narrations—and some of the narrations below—simply refer to the covenant that God made with the Children of Adam, without referring to how they were taken out of Adam's loins and how God showed Himself to them. They are compared to *dharr* (atoms, particles, ants) as an illustration of their multitude, but not in the sense of their physical size or other aspects. Since this analogy is used repeatedly in the narrations, that higher realm is often called *ʿālam al-dharr* (the world of particles, the realm of atomic existence, the world of ants).

The last narration clearly shows that the conversation in the verse was a real speech between God and the people, not a metaphorical communication through their state and condition (*lisān al-ḥāl*). Moreover, the narration says that the covenant was not about God's Lordship alone, but it also included prophethood and other truths. All of these points confirm our interpretation above.

(4) Rifāʿah says: Once I asked Imam al-Ṣādiq about the verse: *When your Lord took from the Children of Adam, from their loins, their descendants* (7:172). He explained: "Yes, [this means that] God has a decisive proof against all His creatures." The Imam clenched his fist and said, "He took them on the day of the covenant like this."[3]

Author's comment: This narration apparently interprets "taking" (*akhdh*) as "encompassing" (*iḥāṭah*) and "having control" (*mulk*) over them.[4]

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1 This confirms another reading and interpretation of the verse, where the people's answer is only the confirmation *balá* ("Yes indeed"). Then there is a pause, and what follows (*We bore witness lest you should say…*) is the speech of the angels. Much like many other verses in the Qur'an, the first person plural here—We bear (or bore) witness—can be treated as the majestic plural, called "the royal we." Many narrations below also quote the verse only up to "Yes indeed," implying a full stop there. (Trans.)

2 *Tafsīr al-ʿAyyāshī* and al-Sayyid al-Raḍī's *al-Khaṣāʾiṣ*, on the authority of al-Aṣbagh b. Nubātah.

3 *Tafsīr al-ʿAyyāshī*.

4 In other word, the verse is not about extracting and taking out the individuals

(5) Ibn Muskān says: Concerning the verse *When your Lord took from the Children of Adam, from their loins, their descendants and He made them bear witness over themselves, [He said to them,] "Am I not your Lord?" They said, "Yes indeed!"* (7:172) I asked Imam al-Ṣādiq, "Was this an actual vision?" He said, "Yes. The knowledge [of God's Lordship] was thus established, but then they forgot the scene, but they will remember it again [on the Day of Resurrection]. Had it not been for that [vision], no one would know Who is their Creator and Provider. In that world of particles (*al-dharr*), some of them admitted with the tongue, but did not believe it in the heart. That is what God says: *but they were not to believe in what they had disbelieved in earlier* (10:74)."[1]

Author's comment: The opponents of the world of pre-existence claim that the verse is not about some covenant that was made in another realm. Instead, the verse's expression—*He made them bear witness over themselves, [He said to them,] "Am I not your Lord?"* (7:172)—means that God has made known to the people the *signs* that prove His Lordship. The above narration, which is authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*), refutes this interpretation. We shall present other similar narrations in terms of authenticity and explicitness below, on the authority of Zurārah and others.

(6) Zurārah says: Once a man asked Imam al-Bāqir about the verse: *When your Lord took from the Children of Adam, from their loins, their descendants…* (7:172). The Imam replied, while his father was listening: "My father narrated that God took a handful of the dust with which He created Adam. He poured sweet and agreeable water on it, and left it for forty days. Then He poured salty and bitter water on it, and left it for forty days. When the clay was leavened, He took it and scrubbed it hard. Thus [numerous] ant-like creatures emerged from its right and left. He ordered them all to enter the fire. The People of the Right entered, whereby it became cool and safe for them, but the People of the Left refrained to

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from the loins of their fathers, but it is about holding the people accountable, closing down on them with evidence, and leaving them with no excuse or argument. (Trans.)

1 *Tafsīr al-Qummī*, on the authority of his father, on the authority of Ibn Abī ʿUmayr.

enter.[1]

Author's comment: There are other narrations that convey the same idea. The command to enter fire is an expression for stepping into the sanctuary of servitude, obedience and submission.

(7) Imam al-Bāqir said, "This is indeed how God created the people: He created whom He liked from what He liked, and what He liked was to be created from the clay of paradise. He whom He disliked from what He disliked, and what He disliked was to be created from the clay of hell. Then He raised them in [the form of] shadows."

Someone asked, "What are these shadows?"

The Imam explained, "Do you see your shadow under the sun? It is something [in a sense] and it is nothing [in a sense]. Then He raised the prophets among them, and they invited them to acknowledge God [as their sole Lord]. This is what He says: *If you ask them, 'Who created them?' they will surely say, 'Allah'* (43:87). They [the prophets] called them [the people] to acknowledge the prophets [as God's messengers]. Some of them acknowledged, and some of them refused. Then they called them to our *wilāyah* (divine guardianship, spiritual authority). Some of them acknowledged—by God they were those whom God liked—and some of them refused. That is what He says: *but they were not to believe in what they had disbelieved in earlier* (10:74)." Then the Imam added: "Denial was there [from day one]."[2]

Author's comment: Although this narration does not interpret the verse per se, we presented it because it refers to the story of God's covenant with the people. This narration talks about "the shadows" (*al-ẓilāl*), which appears repeatedly in the narrations from the Imams of Ahl al-Bayt. As the above narration shows, "the shadows" apparently refer to that higher realm, which is identical with this world in a sense, and which is different from it in another sense. Therefore, it has some properties that are identical with the properties of this world, and other properties that are

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1 *Al-Kāfī*, on the authority of ʿAlī b. Ibrāhīm, on the authority of his father, on the authority of Ibn Abī ʿUmayr.

2 *Al-Kāfī*, via its chain of narration, on the authority of ʿAbd-Allāh b. Muḥammad al-Juʿfī and ʿUqbah.

different from it. This description matches our interpretation of the verse.

(8) Abū Baṣīr says: I asked Imam al-Ṣādiq, "How did the people answer God while they were ants (or particles)?" He said, "He placed in them something with which they would answer Him when He questions them."[1]

Author's comment: What the Imam means here—by "something with which they would answer Him"—is not merely what is conveyed through their condition and state (called *lisān al-ḥāl*). The transmitter's impression was that people's response in that world was like our responses in our regular conversations in this world. He inquired about it because responding in this manner is unlikely from ant-like (or atomic) creatures. The Imam explained to him that the matter over there was such that if it were to descend to this world, it would map onto verbal response with the tongue. That is why the narration says, "when He questions them," not "if they were to speak" or anything like that.[2]

(9) Abū Baṣīr says: Concerning *"Am I not your Lord?"* I asked Imam al-Ṣādiq: "Did they reply with their tongues?"
"Yes," he said, "and also with their hearts."
I asked, "And where were they at that time?"[3]
He said, "He created in [or of] them what sufficed them [to answer]."[4]

Author's comment: The idea that they answered with their tongues and hearts means that if they were to be transformed from their mode of existence in that realm to a worldly existence, their response would map onto our common verbal response in our worldly conversations. However, in that higher realm, one's heart and tongue are identical and

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1 *Al-Kāfī*. It is also narrated in *Tafsīr al-ʿAyyāshī*, where the transmitter [Abū Baṣīr] adds at the end: "That is with respect to the covenant."

2 "If they were to speak" would imply *lisān al-ḥāl* (language of condition or state), which is called "speech" only figuratively. But "when He questions them" means a real response; that is, an intended and conscious message through a mode of communication that is compatible with that realm. (Trans.)

3 The narration says, "But what were they at that time?" The author has misquoted this part. Part of his explanation below is also based on his version. (Trans.)

4 *Tafsīr al-ʿAyyāshī*.

not yet differentiated. That is why the Imam first confirmed the tongue, and then added the heart: "Yes, and also with their hearts."

The rest of the narration is based on the transmitter's impression that this event occurred in this world of nature. Some narrations which talk about the extraction of Adam's descendants from his loin also specify the place of this event. In fact, some of these narrations are narrated on the authority of Abū Baṣīr himself—who is the transmitter of the above hadith. Having heard these narrations, he asked the Imam: "Where were they at that time?" The Imam did not determine their place, but said: "He created in them what sufficed them [to answer]." That is, God created them in a way that they could be questioned and could answer. All of these confirm our interpretation of that higher world. Moreover, this narration and others [which we quoted above] are almost explicit in saying that the conversation in the verse was through a real sense of speech [as opposed to a metaphorical one through the language of condition]. Rather, they *are* explicit [not *almost* explicit].

(10) The Messenger of God said: "God created the creatures, finalized His decree, and made a covenant with the prophets *while His Throne was [then] upon the waters* (11:7). Then He took the People of the Right in His right hand, and the People of the Left in His other hand—both hands of the All-Merciful are right.[1]
'O People of the Right!' He called out.
'Here we are," they responded, 'at Thy service, our Lord!'
'Am I not your Lord?' He inquired.
They said, 'Yes indeed!' (7:172).
'O People of the Left!' He called out.
'Here we are," they responded, 'at Thy service, our Lord!'
'Am I not your Lord?' He inquired.
They said, 'Yes indeed!' (7:172).
Then He mixed them together. Someone among them asked, 'My Lord! Why did You mix us?'
He said: *they have deeds besides that which they perpetrate* (23:63); *[This,] lest you should say on the Day of Resurrection, 'Indeed we were unaware of this'* (7:172). Then He returned them to the loin

1 Right (*yamīn*) symbolizes fortune, felicity and blessedness (*yumn*). Left (*shimāl*) symbolizes misfortune and misery (*shuʿm*). God is all blessing, and only blessedness ensues from Him. (Trans.)

of Adam. So the people of paradise belong to it, and the people of hell belong to it."

At that point someone asked, "What about the actions, O Messenger of God?"

He explained, "Every group acts toward their [destined] position."

ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb said, "So we will strive hard."[1]

Author's comment: *While His Throne was [then] upon the waters* (11:7) indicates the precedence of the world of covenant to this world [existentially and ontologically]. This does not mean a temporal precedence of the spirits over the bodies. We already discussed the logical problem with the temporal precedence of the world of pre-existence as commonly understood by most proponents of this view.

"Every group acts toward their [destined] position": This means that the fulfillment and attainment of any position requires actions that are commensurate with that position. If one is to go to paradise, they will inevitably do good in this world; and if one is to go to hell, they will inevitably do evil in this world. We have been called [by the prophets and religions] to strive for paradise through good deeds. It is one's actions which determine one's position. Good deeds will inevitably place one in paradise, and evil deeds will inevitably place one in hell.

God says: *And everyone has a direction that God is in charge of it; so take the lead in the good works* (2:148).[2] This verse implies two things at once: (1) God determines where everyone is going. (2) You should vie to do good. There is no contradiction between the two. Felicity and wretchedness become inevitable if their complete cause occurs, but they are not inevitable with respect to the person's choice and free will, because that is only *part* of the complete cause. What determines and finalizes the occurrence of an event is the fulfillment of its complete cause, not just part of

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1 *Al-Durr al-manthūr*, on the authority of ʿAbd b. Ḥumayd, al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī's *Nawādir al-uṣūl*, Abū al-Shaykh's *al-ʿAẓamah* and Ibn Mardawayh, on the authority of Abū Amāmah.

2 The verse's translation is based on the author's discussion below. A more apparent, accurate and common translation is: *And everyone has a direction to which he turns…* (2:148). In other words, the pronoun "he" apparently refers to everyone which is explicitly mentioned in the verse, not to God. (Trans.)

it. We discussed this in detail in several places before.[1] Our last discussion of it was in the same chapter, under the verses: *as He brought you forth in the beginning, so will you return. A part [of humankind] He has guided, while error is fixed upon a part* (7:29-30), where we also presented and interpreted the narrations about *ṭīnah* (clay, substance).[2]

(11) Concerning the verse, *When your Lord took from the Children of Adam…* (7:172) Ibn ʿAbbās said: God created Adam and made a covenant with Him that He is his Lord. He wrote his term, his sustenance and his hardships. Then He took out his children from his loin in the form of ants (or particles). He made a covenant with them that He is their Lord. He wrote their terms, their sustenance, and their hardships.[3]

Author's comment: This idea is narrated from Ibn ʿAbbās through many chains of narration in various terms. What is common in all of them is that God extracted Adam's descendants from his loin and made a covenant with them.

(12) Concerning *When your Lord took from the Children of Adam, from their loins, their descendants* (7:172) it is narrated from Ibn ʿAbbās, Ibn Masʿūd and many other Companions: When God expelled Adam from the Garden, before He sent him down from the heaven, He touched the right side of his loin, whence He brought forth descendants that were white like pearl in the form of ants (or particles). He told them, "Enter paradise by My mercy." And He touched the left side of his loin, whence He brought forth descendants that were black in the form of ants (or particles). He told them, "Enter hell, and I do not give a hoot." That is what is meant by *the People of the Right Hand* (56:27) and *the People of the Left Hand* (56:41).

Then He took their covenant and said: *"Am I not your Lord?" They said, "Yes indeed!"* (7:172). One group made the covenant willingly,

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1 See volume 1 (1st ed.), pp. 166ff and 180ff, and volume 5 (2nd ed.), pp. 20ff of the English translation. (Trans.)

2 See the section titled "II. Narrations about *ṭīnah* (clay, substance)" in volume 15 of the English translation. (Trans.)

3 *Al-Durr al-manthūr*, on the authority of ʿAbd b. Ḥumayd, Ibn Jarīr, Ibn al-Mundhir, Ibn Abī Ḥātim and Abū al-Shaykh.

and one group made it reluctantly out of fear (*taqiyyah*). Then God and the angels said: *"We bear witness, lest you should say on the Day of Resurrection, 'Indeed we were unaware of this,' or lest you should say, 'Our fathers ascribed partners [to Allah] before [us]'"* (7:172-173).[1]

Hence everyone among the descendants of Adam knows God as their Lord. This is what He says: *to Him submits whoever there is in the heavens and the earth, willingly or unwillingly* (3:83). He also says: *To Allah belongs the conclusive argument* (6:149), which means [conclusive argument] on the day of making the covenant.[2]

Author's comment: A similar account of *al-dharr* (ants, particles, atoms) is narrated in Sunni sources from many Companions—either ending with the Companions (called *mawqūf*) or ending with the Prophet (called *mawṣūl*)—including: ᶜAlī, Ibn ᶜAbbās, ᶜUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb, ᶜAbd-Allāh b. ᶜUmar, Salmān, Abū Hurayrah, Abū Amāmah, Abū Saᶜīd al-Khudrī, ᶜAbd-Allāh b. Masᶜūd, ᶜAbd al-Raḥmān b. Qatādah, Abū al-Dardāʾ, Anas, Muᶜāwiyah and Abū Mūsá al-Ashᶜarī. It is narrated in Shia sources from Imams ᶜAlī, ᶜAlī b. al-Ḥusayn, Muḥammad b. ᶜAlī, Jaᶜfar b. Muḥammad and al-Ḥasan b. ᶜAlī al-ᶜAskarī. There also many Sunni narrations—through various chains—from ᶜAlī b. al-Ḥusayn, Muḥammad b. ᶜAlī and Jaᶜfar b. Muḥammad. Therefore, one could arguably claim that this is mass-transmitted in terms of its overall meaning (called *al-mutawātir al-maᶜnawī*).

(13) The Messenger of God said, "Indeed God created Adam, then He took the people out of his loin and said: 'These shall be in paradise, and I do not give a hoot; and these shall be in hell, and I do not give a hoot.'"

There a man asked, "So on what basis shall we act, Messenger of God?"

He said, "Based on what has been predestined."[3]

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1 See my note on hadith 3 above. (Trans.)

2 *Al-Durr al-manthūr*, on the authority of Ibn ᶜAbd al-Barr's *al-Tamhīd*, from Ibn ᶜAbbās through Abū Ṣāliḥ, and through Abū Mālik and al-Suddī; and from Ibn Masᶜūd through Murrah al-Hamdānī.

3 *Al-Durr al-manthūr*, on the authority of Ibn Saᶜd and Aḥmad, on the authority of ᶜAbd al-Raḥmān b. Qatādah al-Sulamī, who was one of the Prophet's Companions.

Author's comment: The second half of this narration is similar to what we narrated from Abū Amāmah [number 10 above]. The man's understanding of "These shall be in paradise, and I do not give a hoot; and these shall be in hell, and I do not give a hoot" was that our free will is ineffective. So the Prophet explained to him that this itself is part of God's predestination (*qadar*). While our deeds are imputed to us as their actor, they also map onto God's predestination, and God's predestination matches them. The point here is that God has predestined our deeds *through* our free will. That is why we act with our volition, and at the same time that corresponds to God's predestination. His predestination does not overturn our choice and the effectiveness of our free will. There are numerous narrations in this regard.

(14) Zurārah says: I asked Imam al-Bāqir about the verse: *As ḥunafāʾ of Allah, not ascribing partners to Him* (22:31). He said, "*Ḥanafiyyah* is of the same nature as the *fiṭrah* (primal nature, innate disposition, initial makeup), *according to which He originated humankind. There is no altering Allah's creation* (30:30). He hard-wired them with His knowledge."

I also asked him about the verse: *When your Lord took from the Children of Adam, from their loins, their descendants and He made them bear witness over themselves, [He said to them,] "Am I not your Lord?" They said, "Yes indeed"* (7:172). He said, "He extracted all of Adam's descendants until the Day of Resurrection from his loin. They emerged like ants (or particles), and He introduced and showed Himself to them. Had it not been for that, no one would know their Lord. The Messenger of God said: Every child is born on the original nature (*fiṭrah*), meaning the knowledge that the Almighty God is their Creator. That is what He says: *If you ask them, 'Who created the heavens and the earth?' they will surely say, 'Allah'* (31:25)."[1]

Author's comment: This narration confirms our interpretation of the conversation and witnessing mentioned in the verse. This refutes the view of the opponents of the world of pre-existence, who advocate an

1 *Al-Kāfī*, on the authority of ʿAlī b. Ibrāhīm, on the authority of his father, on the authority of Ibn Abī ʿUmayr, on the authority of Ibn Udhaynah. Al-ʿAyyāshī has also narrated the middle part of this hadith from Zurārah with exactly the same wording in his *Tafsīr*.

indirect knowledge of God through His signs that point to His Lordship over all beings.

Another version of the same hadith says: "He introduced and showed *His creation* to them," instead of "He introduced and showed *Himself* to them."[1] Perhaps one of the transmitters opted out of a verbatim narration of the hadith because it suggests a physical body for God. However, this alteration not only ruins the original wording, but also the meaning of the hadith. The narration says, "showed *Himself* to them" in both *al-Kāfī* and *Tafsīr al-ʿAyyāshī*. Furthermore, we read above [in hadith 5] that Ibn Muskān asked Imam al-Ṣādiq, "Was this an actual vision?" and the Imam said, "Yes!" We already explained that this vision has nothing to with physicality and anthropomorphism.

(15) Zurārah says: I asked Imam al-Ṣādiq about the verse: *When your Lord took…* (7:172). He said, "The knowledge [of God's Lordship] was established in their hearts, but they forgot the scene [when they came to this world]. Nonetheless, they will remember it again someday [on the Day of Resurrection]. Had it not been for that, no one would know Who is their Creator and Provider."[2]

(16) Imam al-Ṣādiq said: ʿAlī b. al-Ḥusayn saw no problem with contraception[3] on the account of the verse: *When your Lord took from the Children of Adam, from their loins, their descendants and He made them bear witness over themselves, [He said to them,] "Am I not your Lord?" They said, "Yes indeed"* (7:172). Any person that God took out for the covenant will inevitably be born, even if it [the sperm] is diverted to a hard rock.[4]

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1 *Maʿānī al-akhbār*, with the same chain of narration, on the authority of Zurārah.

2 *Al-Maḥāsin*, on the authority of al-Ḥasan b. ʿAlī b. Faḍḍāl, on the authority of Ibn Bukayr.

3 This is called *ʿazl*, which is defined generally as preventing the sperm from entering the uterus. (Trans.)

4 *Al-Kāfī*, via its chain of narration. *Al-Durr al-manthūr* has also narrated the same idea about the Imam [ʿAlī b. al-Ḥusayn], on the authority of Ibn Abī Shaybah and Ibn Jarīr. It has also narrated the same notion from the Prophet, on the authority of Saʿīd b. Manṣūr and Ibn Mardawayh, on the authority of Abū Saʿīd al-Khudrī.

Author's comment: The readers should realize that there are indeed very many narrations concerning the world of pre-existence. We skipped most of them because what we quoted above suffices to convey their message. There are also other narrations which talk about God's covenant with the Prophet Muḥammad and the other prophets. We will present them in their proper place, by God's will.[1]

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1 See volume 6 (1st ed.), pp. 212ff of the English translation, under verse 3:81. The author has also quoted one hadith and presented some discussion under verse 33:8. (Trans.)

Verses 175-179

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وَ اتْلُ عَلَيْهِمْ نَبَأَ الَّذِى آتَيْناهُ آياتِنا فَانْسَلَخَ مِنْها فَأَتْبَعَهُ الشَّيْطانُ فَكانَ مِنَ
الْغاوِينَ ﴿١٧٥﴾ وَ لَوْ شِئْنا لَرَفَعْناهُ بِها وَ لكِنَّهُ أَخْلَدَ إِلَى الْأَرْضِ وَ اتَّبَعَ هَواهُ فَمَثَلُهُ
كَمَثَلِ الْكَلْبِ إِنْ تَحْمِلْ عَلَيْهِ يَلْهَثْ أَوْ تَتْرُكْهُ يَلْهَثْ ذلِكَ مَثَلُ الْقَوْمِ الَّذِينَ
كَذَّبُوا بِآياتِنا فَاقْصُصِ الْقَصَصَ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَتَفَكَّرُونَ ﴿١٧٦﴾ ساءَ مَثَلاً الْقَوْمُ الَّذِينَ
كَذَّبُوا بِآياتِنا وَ أَنْفُسَهُمْ كانُوا يَظْلِمُونَ ﴿١٧٧﴾ مَنْ يَهْدِ اللَّهُ فَهُوَ الْمُهْتَدِى وَ مَنْ
يُضْلِلْ فَأُولئِكَ هُمُ الْخاسِرُونَ ﴿١٧٨﴾ وَ لَقَدْ ذَرَأْنا لِجَهَنَّمَ كَثِيراً مِنَ الْجِنِّ وَ الْإِنْسِ
لَهُمْ قُلُوبٌ لا يَفْقَهُونَ بِها وَ لَهُمْ أَعْيُنٌ لا يُبْصِرُونَ بِها وَ لَهُمْ آذانٌ لا يَسْمَعُونَ
بِها أُولئِكَ كَالْأَنْعامِ بَلْ هُمْ أَضَلُّ أُولئِكَ هُمُ الْغافِلُونَ ﴿١٧٩﴾

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(7:175) *Relate to them an account of him to whom We gave Our signs, but he cast them off. Thereupon Satan pursued him, and he became one of the perverse.*

(7:176) *Had We willed, We would have surely raised him by their means, but he clung to the earth and followed his [base] desires. So his parable is that of a dog: if you make for it, it lolls out its tongue, and if you let it alone, it lolls out its tongue. Such is the parable of the people who deny Our signs. So recount these narratives, so that they may reflect.*

(7:177) *Evil is the parable of the people who deny Our signs and wrong themselves.*

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(7:178) *Whomever Allah guides is rightly guided, and whomever He leads astray—it is they who are the losers.*

(7:179) *Certainly We have created for hell many of the jinn and humans: they have hearts with which they do not understand, they have eyes with which they do not see, they have ears with which they*

do not hear. They are like cattle; rather, they are more astray. It is they who are the heedless.

Introduction

Here we read another story from the Children of Israel, and that is the story of Balaam son of Beor. God orders the Prophet to recount this story for the people in order to clarify that one cannot reach salvation unless God wills it for the person, even if the person has access to all apparent means. And God does not will salvation for one who is engrossed in the earthly life and follows one's desires. The end of such a person will be hell. Then God describes the sign of such individuals among them: they do not utilize their hearts, eyes and ears in a way that benefits them. Put more generally: they are heedless.

Commentary

وَ اتْلُ عَلَيْهِمْ نَبَأَ الَّذِى آتَيْناهُ آياتِنا فَانْسَلَخَ مِنْها فَأَتْبَعَهُ الشَّيْطانُ فَكانَ مِنَ الْغاوِينَ ﴿١٧٥﴾

(7:175) ***Relate to them an account*** **(nabaʾ)** ***of him to whom We gave*** **(ātaynāhu, from ītāʾ)** ***Our signs, but he cast them off*** **(fa-insalakha, from insilākh).** ***Thereupon Satan pursued him*** **(atbaʿahu, from itbāʾ), *and he became one of the perverse*** **(al-ghāwīn, from ghayy).**

Nabaʾ means "news about something significant." The word ītāʾ (giving, bestowing), in the context of this verse, means being endowed with spiritual signs and special inner stations that would illumine the path to knowing God for the person, and would unveil the truth for them without leaving any doubt. *Insilākh* (sloughing off) means "something coming out of its skin." In this verse it is a metaphor, stating that the signs of God were an outer cast for him, from which the evil in his inside came off. *Itbāʾ* is synonymous with *tabaʿ* and *ittibāʿ*. It means "to go after and follow the footsteps of someone." *Tabiʿa*, *atbaʿa* and *ittabaʿa* all mean the same thing (he followed). *Ghayy* and *ghawāyah* imply forgetting the goal and destination (*ghāyah*). It is as though one goes out of the right way because they no longer remember the destination of the journey. This makes *ghayy* and *ghawāyah* similar to *ḍalāl* (erring, going astray). One who remembers the destination but misses the path is called *ḍāll* (misled, misguided, erring),

while one who is on the path but forgets the destination is called *ghawī*. The specific meaning of *ḍāll* that we said is more applicable in the current verse, because once the person cast off God's signs and was hunted down by Satan, he lost track of the right path, and was no longer able to save himself from perdition. Sometimes *ghawāyah* and *ḍalālah* are used equally and interchangeably, to indicate straying from the right path that leads to the desired destination.

Exegetes are of different opinions about who this person was. We will discuss most or all of their views in our examination of the narrations, by God's will. The verse does not mention the person's name, and provides only a concise account of his story. Yet, it is quite apparent from the verse that it refers to a real case that occurred, not a symbolic account. Hence, we should disregard the view that "it is only a symbolic story, not a true event."

The verse's meaning is: *Relate to them*: to the Children of Israel, or to all people. *An account of him to whom We gave Our signs*: We unveiled divine signs and spiritual indications to him, through which the truth was illumined to him. *But he cast them off*: he forsook them after being endowed with them. *Thereupon Satan pursued him, and he became one of the perverse*: such that he was unable to save himself.

وَ لَوْ شِئْنا لَرَفَعْناهُ بِها وَ لكِنَّهُ أَخْلَدَ إِلَى الْأَرْضِ وَ اتَّبَعَ هَواهُ فَمَثَلُهُ كَمَثَلِ الْكَلْبِ إِنْ تَحْمِلْ عَلَيْهِ يَلْهَثْ أَوْ تَتْرُكْهُ يَلْهَثْ ذلِكَ مَثَلُ الْقَوْمِ الَّذِينَ كَذَّبُوا بِآياتِنا فَاقْصُصِ الْقَصَصَ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَتَفَكَّرُونَ ﴿١٧٦﴾

(7:176) ***Had We willed, We would have surely raised him by their means, but he clung* (akhlada, from ikhlād) *to the earth and followed his [base] desires. So his parable is that of a dog: if you make for it, it lolls out its tongue* (yalhath, from lahth)*, and if you let it alone, it lolls out its tongue. Such is the parable of the people who deny Our signs. So recount these narratives, so that they may reflect.***

Ikhlād means "being committed to something consistently." *Ikhlād* to the earth means adhering to it. It is a metaphor for hankering after worldly pleasures and being engrossed in them. The word *lahth* is used when a dog hangs out its tongue indicating thirst.

Had We willed, We would have surely raised him by their means…: The pronoun "their" refers to the divine signs (*āyāt*) in the last verse. What

is meant by "raising" here is nearness to God, which implies elevation from the base life of this world. The spiritual signs of God [mentioned in the last verse] are outward means and instruments by which one can be raised and guided. However, they does not guarantee one's felicity, because the full impact and working of these signs depend on God's will. God has not willed felicity for one who turns away from Him and chooses anthing other than Him. That is what is meant by earthly life, which diverts one from God and His abode of grace. In and of itself, the life of this world is the lowest of the low (*asfala sāfilīn*, 95:5) in the sense that it keeps one busy from God and His signs through constant occupations with worldly affairs.[1] Turning away from God and denying His signs are forms of *ẓulm* (injustice, wrong), but God has made a definite decree that He *does not guide the wrongdoing lot* (258, 3:86, 5:51, 6:144, 9:19, 9:109, 28:50, 46:10, 61:7, 62:5). He has also decreed that *those who are faithless and deny Our signs, they shall be the inmates of the Fire and they shall remain in it [forever]* (2:39).

… but he clung to the earth and followed his [base] desires…: This sentence justifies the previous part of the verse. The implied meaning is: "We did not will to raise him *because* he clung to the earth and followed his base desires. That is why he qualified for Our misguidance instead of Our guidance." This is according to the verse: *and Allah leads astray the wrongdoers, and Allah does whatever He wills* (14:27).

… So his parable is that of a dog: if you make for it* (taḥmil)*, it lolls out its tongue, and if you let it alone, it lolls out its tongue…: This is his trait, and he does not refrain from it whether you forbid and dissuade him, or you leave him on his own. The verb *taḥmil* is derived from the verbal noun *ḥamlah* (attack, assault), not from the verbal noun *ḥaml* (load, burden, carriage).[2]

… Such is the parable of the people who deny Our signs…: This means that denying the signs of God is an established vice for them. It is an evil quality that is deeply ingrained in their souls. That is why the more they face Our signs, the more they deny Our signs.

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1 In other words, "the world" (dunyā) refers to anything other than God; anything that engages and blocks one from the divine. (Trans.)

2 In other words, the verse does not mean "if you impose a load on him" but it means "if you attack him." (Trans.)

… So recount these narratives…: The word *qaṣaṣ* could be either a *maṣdar* (verbal noun, gerund) or an *ism maṣdar* (quasi-infinitive noun). In the first case the meaning would be: "Narrate for them by way of narrating." In the second case the meaning would be: "Narrate for them this narration."[1]

… so that they may reflect: So that they may submit to the truth and refrain from falsehood.

ساءَ مَثَلاً الْقَوْمُ الَّذِينَ كَذَّبُوا بِآياتِنا وَ أَنْفُسَهُمْ كانُوا يَظْلِمُونَ ﴿١٧٧﴾

(7:177) ***Evil is the parable of the people who deny Our signs and wrong themselves.***

This verse conveys two points: (1) It rebukes the disbelievers for their denial God's signs. (2) It informs them that they do not harm God by doing so. Instead, they wrong themselves because they are the only ones who suffer from their denial.

مَنْ يَهْدِ اللَّهُ فَهُوَ الْمُهْتَدِي وَ مَنْ يُضْلِلْ فَأُولئِكَ هُمُ الْخاسِرُونَ ﴿١٧٨﴾

(7:178) ***Whomever Allah guides is rightly guided*** **(al-muhtadī)**, ***and whomever He leads astray—it is they who are the losers*** **(al-khāsirūn).**

What is meant here is that no case of guidance is fruitful unless it is accompanied by God's guidance. Otherwise, the other elements of guidance do not constitute a complete cause to guarantee one's felicity. Similarly, going astray does not result in a definite loss unless God leads one astray. That is when the cause is complete and one's loss is finalized.

One is not saved by possessing the means of salvation such as apparent *īmān* (faith, belief) and *taqwá* (Godwariness, self-restraint). Similarly, one is not damned and lost by having the means of error. Both sides of the story are contingent on God's will. He is the One Who guides anyone through His will, and misguides anyone through it. Therefore, the verse is effectively saying: Genuine guidance, which bears the fruits of guidance, is only when God wills so for the person. Otherwise, it is only an appearance of guidance, but without any truth to it. The same applies to error.

Based on our interpretation, the article *al-* at the beginning of

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1 In the first case, the word *qaṣaṣ* (narration, narrating) is added for emphasis. In the second case, the word *qaṣaṣ* would be the object of the imperative *uqṣuṣ* (recount, narrate). (Trans.)

al-muhtadī (the guided) and *al-khāsirūn* (the losers) indicates perfection of these two qualities, not exclusivity (*ḥaṣr*). Alternatively, one could say that the article *al-* implies exclusivity. In that case, the verse is restricting real guidance and real misguidance to God's doing. But of course: *He leads no one astray thereby except the transgressors* (2:26).

وَ لَقَدْ ذَرَأْنا لِجَهَنَّمَ كَثِيراً مِنَ الْجِنِّ وَ الْإِنْسِ لَهُمْ قُلُوبٌ لا يَفْقَهُونَ بِها وَ لَهُمْ أَعْيُنٌ لا يُبْصِرُونَ بِها وَ لَهُمْ آذانٌ لا يَسْمَعُونَ بِها أُولئِكَ كَالْأَنْعامِ بَلْ هُمْ أَضَلُّ أُولئِكَ هُمُ الْغافِلُونَ ﴿١٧٩﴾

(7:179) ***Certainly We have created* (dharaʾnā, from dharʾ) *for hell many of the jinn and humans: they have hearts with which they do not understand, they have eyes with which they do not see, they have ears with which they do not hear. They are like cattle; rather, they are more astray. It is they who are the heedless.***

Dharʾ means *khalq* (to create, to make). Here God says that the purpose of creation is hell for a large number of people and the jinn. Elsewhere He defines the purpose of creation as mercy, which is paradise: *except those on whom your Lord has mercy—and that is why He created them* (11:119). There is no contradiction between these verses, because there are two aspects to the purpose of an action: (1) the perfection of the action; (2) the end where the action leads to.

Further explanation: Imagine a carpenter who wants to build a door. He picks up some lumber, measures them, and then cuts, chisels and trims them until he makes the door. His purpose in what he does with the lumber is to make a door. That is the perfection of his action. But this is only from one angle. From another angle, he knows from the beginning that not all lumber can be turned into a door. A door has a certain shape that does not match the initial shape of some lumber. That is why there will inevitably be some waste in the process because some pieces do not match the design. The disposal of these pieces is also part of his objective from the beginning. This is called "purpose by necessity" (*qaṣd ḍarūrī*). Therefore, we can say that a carpenter has two purposes with respect to the lumber at his disposal: (1) A purpose which is a form of perfection, and that is to make a door; (2) a secondary and subordinate purpose, which is to convert some of the lumber into a door, and throw out the rest as

waste. The part that is discarded is because of *lacking* the potential to be formed into a door.

The same can be said about a farmer. She plants seeds in the land in order to harvest wheat. However, not all of the seeds make it to become a full-grown plant. Some do, while some are wasted in the land, spoiled by insects, or eaten by livestock. All of these are in a way intended by the farmer, while the wheat is her intention in another way.

God's will was to create human beings from the earth so that they may serve Him and thus enter His mercy. However, the life of this world is defined by opposing causes and forces. This does not permit all members of the species to pursue their real path of salvation, because they develop a range of different aptitudes and capacities in this life. The qualities that they acquire in this world must coincide with that primary goal of human perfection and felicity. Therefore, we can say that God has two purposes in the creation of humankind: (1) to embrace them with His mercy and admit them into His paradise; (2) to take the wretched individuals who have lost their potentials to hell, even though He created them for paradise. The first purpose is the primary purpose which is the perfection of the species, while the second one is a secondary purpose by necessity. The divine decree that certain individuals shall be felicitous and certain others shall be damned pertains to this second type of purpose. The second purpose is God's knowledge of where each person will end, whether in felicity or in damnation. Both are dictated by His subordinate will, not by His primary will.

What is said in this verse—*Certainly We have created for hell many of the jinn and humans*—relates to this secondary and subordinate will of God. There are many other verses in the Qur'an which also convey the same notion.

… they have hearts with which they do not understand, they have eyes with which they do not see, they have ears with which they do not hear…: Here the verse points to their inability to position themselves where God's streams of mercy flow and His breezes of assistance blow. That is why they do not benefit from the divine signs that they see, the admonitions that they hear from the followers of the truth, and the proofs and evidence that they hold within their divine intuition (*fiṭrah*).

The intellects,[1] the eyes and the ears do not fail to function in the way

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1 The heart (*qalb*) is often interpreted as *ʿaql* (intellect, reason). It denotes our capacity for all forms of cognition. Thus the verse says: *they have hearts with*

that they are created for, as God says: *There is no altering Allah's creation* (30:30). Only God can alter them, but that would again be part of *Allah's creation*, not an exception to the verse. Yet, He has ordained that He shall not take away His blessings from any people unless they take the initiative to deviate: *That is because Allah never changes a blessing that He has bestowed on a people unless they change what is in their own souls* (8:53).

It is God Who cancels their potential, and renders their hearts, eyes and ears non-functional. He does so only as a punishment in return for their own misdeeds. They alter the blessings of God by distorting the path of serving Him. As a result, He requites them by sealing their hearts, veiling their eyes, and deafening their ears. Thus they cannot understand with their hearts, cannot see with their eyes, and cannot hear with their ears. These are all signs[1] that they are treading the path to hell.

… They are like cattle; rather, they are more astray…: This is a consequence of the previous part and a description of these people. They lack what distinguishes humans from other animals, which is the ability to discriminate—through the use of hearing, sight and reason—between good and evil, and between what is beneficial and harmful with respect to *human perfection*.

The most primitive qualities of animals are to eat and mate, which are best represented by cattle. That is why the verse likens this group of people to grazing livestock; otherwise, they also have the qualities of rapacious predators. Making a gain takes precedence over avoiding a loss.[2] Even in humans, our faculties of anger, which deflect what is harmful, are in the service of our faculties of appetite, which attract what is beneficial. Any animal species is primarily concerned with its growth and procreation;

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which they do not understand (7:179). (Trans.)

1 That is, these are effects and indications, not causes. (Trans.)

2 Given the rest of the paragraph, what is meant by "making a gain" here is apparently the existence and subsistence of the species, which is the most primary need and objective of any living being. Likewise, "avoiding a loss" means dominating others and overcoming the obstacles. Otherwise, avoiding pain takes precedence over seeking pleasure; most people are risk-averse, not risk-inclined; and fear is a stronger incentive than greed. That is why the author says elsewhere: "avoiding a loss takes precedence over making a gain." See volume 29, p. 268 of the English translation, under verse 25:3. (Trans.)

and it employs its faculties of repulsion to secure those primary objectives. Hence, this verse is comparable to the verse: *As for the faithless, they enjoy and eat just like the cattle eat, and the Fire will be their [final] abode* (47:12).

Saying that *they are more astray* implies a sense of straying for the cattle. This *ḍalāl* (straying, error, misguidance) is meant in a relative and relational sense, not literally. Animals are in fact guided, in the sense that they operate according to the faculties that they are equipped with, which direct them to being concerned only with eating and mating. They are not lost with respect to the goal that is set for them, and thus are not blameworthy for it. Their life is a form of straying *in relation to* human perfection—which is not applicable to them since they do not have the means for it. Contrast this with those humans whose hearts, eyes and ears are veiled: human perfection is applicable to them; they have the means to reach it; and they can know the directions through their hearing, sight and reason. Despite all this, they ignore their faculties and derange them. Instead, they utilize their ears, eyes and hearts as if they were meant for animal use: just like the cattle, they use these faculties to enjoy the pleasures of eating and mating. That is what makes their *ḍalāl* (straying, error, misguidance) greater and more intense. The blame, therefore, returns to them in reality.

… It is they who are the heedless: This is another consequence of the above, and a description of their condition. What is meant here is not *exclusivity*, but *reality*. That is, the utmost degree of heedlessness in its genuine sense is found in them. This too is by God's will, Who has sealed their hearts, eyes and ears. *Ghaflah* (heedlessness, inadvertence, unmindfulness) is the root of all error and falsehood.[1]

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1 The essence of hell is to be distanced from God. But what is God? God is timeless: He has an equal relation to all events and beings, whether temporal or atemporal. God is infinite: He is the ultimate bliss since He is free from all limitation and imperfection. Paradise is a reflection and representation of that bliss. As long as we are bound by the shackles of time—through transmitting and projecting the past into the present, and the present into the future—we are veiled from that timeless reality. Nevertheless, God is present all through. He is the all-pervading reality that is the substratum of all phenomena, which appear and disappear like waves on the surface of the ocean. All we have to do is to see the vast ocean that sustains all the waves, to hear its voice, and feel its presence. But through our expectations, desires and preferences—for

Examining Narrations

(1) Concerning verse 7:175 (*Relate to them an account of him to whom We gave Our signs…*) Imam al-Riḍā said: Balʿam b. Bāʿūrāʾ (Balaam son of Beor) was given the Greatest Name of God (*al-ism al-aʿẓam*). Whenever he prayed to God by that name, his request was granted. Then he sided with Pharaoh. When Pharaoh went out chasing Moses and his followers, he told Balaam, "Pray to God against Moses and his followers, so that He withholds them for us." Balaam mounted his donkey to go after Moses, but his donkey did not comply. He started hitting the donkey, whereby God made it speak: "Shame on you! Why do you whip me? Do you want me to come with you so that you may invoke God's curse upon His prophet and the community of believers?" But Balaam kept striking the animal until he killed it. Thus the Greatest Name was "cast off" from his tongue.[1] That is what God says: *but he cast them off. Thereupon Satan pursued him, and he became one of the perverse. Had We willed, We would have surely raised him by their means, but he clung to the earth and followed his [base] desires. So his parable is that of a dog: if you make for it, it lolls out its tongue, and if you let it alone, it lolls out its tongue* (7:175-176). This is a parable that God has given.[2]

Author's comment: Apparently the word "parable" (*matahl*) in the

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anything other than that which is—we run away from it, and thus cause our own suffering by pushing on the fringe and refusing to sink into the rich infinite. That is how heedlessness is at the essence of our self-caused suffering. The solution is to transcend our separative mode of operation to a unitive and connective one. It is our transitive approach to events—where we are inadvertent of their impermanent nature—that confines us to the plane of temporality. If we can observe every moment and event independently, and not as a continuation of the last, we can have a glimpse of timelessness, and that is a state of bliss (Sanskrit ananda). (Trans.)

1 This means that Our signs in the verse are God's Greatest Name. Similarly, *insalakha minhā* (he cast them off) means: "He came out of God's Greatest Name." (Trans.)

2 *Tafsīr al-Qummī*, on the authority of his father, on the authority of al-Ḥusayn b. Khālid.

last part of the hadith refers to the entire story of Balaam [not to the dog metaphor in particular]. By God's will, we shall soon have a discussion on the meaning of God's Greatest Name, when we discuss the excellent names of God (*al-asmāʾ al-ḥusná*).[1]

(2) Concerning verse 7:175 (*Relate to them an account of him to whom We gave Our signs, but he cast them off*) Ibn Masʿūd said: That was a man from the Children of Israel called Balʿam b. Abur[2].[3]

(3) Ibn ʿAbbās said: He was Balʿam b. Bāʿūrāʾ (some narrations say Balʿām b. ʿĀmir). He was given the Greatest Name, and he was one of the Children of Israel.[4]

Author's comment: It is also narrated from others that his name was Balʿam and he was one of the Israelites. There are also some other accounts narrated from Ibn ʿAbbās.

(4) According to some accounts, this verse was revealed with respect to Umayyah b. Abī al-Ṣalt al-Thaqafī, who was a poet in the pre-Islamic era. He studied ancient scriptures and learnt that God would soon send a messenger to the people, so he was hoping to be that messenger. He had moved to Bahrain when the Messenger of God announced his mission. He stayed there for eight years, and then went to see the Messenger of God [in Mecca] with a retinue of his companions. The Prophet invited him to accept Islam, and recited Sūrah Yā-Sīn (Chapter 36) for him. When he finished, Umayyah sprang to his feet and lumbered out. The polytheists of the Quraysh tribe caught him and asked, "What is your view, Umayyah?"

"I need to think about it," he replied. He went to the Levant and was there until the Battle of Badr. Then he came back [to Medina] in order to convert to Islam. However, once he learnt about the

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1 See the section titled "5. The Greatest Name of God (*al-Ism al-Aʿẓam*)" under the next set of verses. (Trans.)

2 This name could also be read as Abar, Abarr and Abir. (Trans.)

3 *Al-Durr al-manthūr*, on the authority of al-Fāriyānī, ʿAbd al-Razzāq, ʿAbd b. Ḥumayd, al-Nasāʾī, Ibn Jarīr, Ibn al-Mundhir, Ibn Abī Ḥātim, Abū al-Shaykh, al-Ṭabarānī and Ibn Mardawayh.

4 *Al-Durr al-manthūr*, on the authority of ʿAbd b. Ḥumayd, Ibn Jarīr, Abū al-Shaykh and Ibn Mardawayh, through various chains of narration.

battle, he changed his mind and said, "Had he [Muḥammad] been a prophet, he would not have killed his own kin." So he changed course to Ṭāʾif, where he died.

His sister, Fāriʿah, went to see the Messenger of God. He asked about how her brother died, and she said that he composed these lines before his death:

كُلُّ عَيْشٍ وَ إِنْ تَطَاوَلَ دَهْراً صَائِرٌ مَرَّةً إِلَى أَنْ يَزُولا

لَيْتَنِي كُنْتُ قَبْلَ مَا قَدْ بَدَا لِي فِي قِلَالِ الْجِبَالِ أَرْعَى الْوُعُولا

إِنَّ يَوْمَ الْحِسَابِ يَوْمٌ عَظِيمٌ شَابَ فِيهِ الصَّغِيرُ يَوْماً ثَقِيلا

Every life, no matter how long it gets,
Is bound to end in a moment or less.
I wish I were grazing goats in mountains;
With the dawning of death, this I confess.
The Day of Retribution is great and heavy;
Children will age out of the day's distress.[1]

The Messenger of God told her: "Recite some [more] of your brother's poems." So she recited a long epic which starts with:

لَكَ الْحَمْدُ وَ النَّعْمَاءُ وَ الْفَضْلُ رَبَّنَا وَ لَا شَيْءَ أَعْلَى مِنْكَ جَدّاً وَ أَمْجَدُ

مَلِيكٌ عَلَى عَرْشِ السَّمَاءِ مُهَيْمِنٌ لِعِزَّتِهِ تَعْنُو الْوُجُوهُ وَ تَسْجُدُ

All praise and grace are Thine, our Lord;
No being exceeds Thy glory and height.
A King that's settled on the Throne of heaven,
All faces are humbled before Thy might.[2]

She also recited another epic that starts with:

يُوقَفُ النَّاسُ لِلْحِسَابِ جَمِيعاً فَشَقِيٌّ مُعَذَّبٌ وَ سَعِيدُ

1 This is a paraphrase of verse 73:17. (Trans.)

2 This is a paraphrase of verse 20:111. (Trans.)

All people shall be stopped
For reckoning, that day;
Some are tortured and doom
While others are gay.[1]

And another one where he says:

عِنْدَ ذِی الْعَرْشِ یُعْرَضُونَ عَلَیْهِ یَعْلَمُ الْجَهْرَ وَ السِّرَارَ الْخَفِیّا
یَوْمَ یَأْتِی الرَّحْمَنُ وَ هْوَ رَحِیمٌ إِنَّهُ کَانَ وَعْدُهُ مَأْتِیّا
رَبِّ إِنْ تَعْفُ فَالْمُعَافَاةُ ظَنِّی أَوْ تُعَاقِبْ فَلَمْ تُعَاقِبْ بَرِیّا

All shall rise before the Lord of the Throne,
Who knows the apparent, and the secrets concealed.
The All-Merciful and the Ever-Merciful
Comes with His promise, and all shall yield.[2]
My Lord, if You pardon, that is my hope;
And if You wish to punish, that's a power You wield.
Since never You've punished someone who's innocent,
Whatever You judge, cannot be appealed.

The Messenger of God said, "Your brother's poem believed, but his heart disbelieved."[3] At that point God revealed this verse [7:175-177].[4]

Author's comment: There are other similar accounts to this. Since the verses of this chapter were apparently revealed in Mecca, these accounts should be viewed as extensions and applications of the verse beyond its original context of revelation (called *taṭbīq*).

(5) It is narrated that the verses refer to Abū ʿĀmir b. al-Nuʿmān b.

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1 This is a paraphrase of verses 11:103-105. (Trans.)

2 The Arabic text here is exactly the same as the last part of verse 19:61. These lines also bear some close affinity with verses: 87:7 and 6:158. (Trans.)

3 In other words, his poems demonstrate *īmān* (faith, belief) in God's religion, but he failed to make the final leap outwardly and submit fully. (Trans.)

4 *Rūḥ al-maʿānī*. An abridged version of this story is also found in *Majmaʿ al-bayān*, which narrates it from ʿAbd-Allāh b. ʿUmar, Saʿīd b. al-Musayyab, Zayd b. Aslam and Abū Rawq.

Ṣayfī, who was a Christian monk, and whom the Prophet called *fāsiq* (ungodly, sinner, evil-doer). During the Pre-Islamic era, he identified himself with monasticism and used to wear coarse clothes. Then he came to Medina and questioned the Prophet, "What is this [religion] that you have brought?"

The Prophet replied, "I have brought the upright religion (*ḥanīfiyyah*), that of Abraham."

"That is what I follow [already]," Abū ʿĀmir said.

"That is not what you follow," the Prophet explained, "because you have added things to it that do not belong to it."

Abū ʿĀmir imprecated, "May God make the liar among us die estranged and lonely."

He went to the Levant, and sent a message to the hypocrites [in Medina] to prepare weapons. Then he went to the Caesar [of the Roman Empire] and recruited an army [of Romans]. He wanted to drive out the Prophet from Medina, but he died in the Levant, estranged and lonely.[1]

Author's comment: Again, this account suffers from the fact that the sūrah was revealed in Mecca. There are some other implausible stories that are narrated here, which are not worthy of mention.

(6) Imam al-Bāqir said: While the original subject of the story is Balaam, God has generalized it as an analogy for any Muslim who chooses to follow their desire instead of God's guidance.[2]

(7) Concerning *they have hearts with which they do not understand* (7:179) Imam al-Bāqir said: "God has sealed their hearts; thus they do not understand." Concerning *they have eyes with which they do not see* (7:179) he said: "A cover is cast on their eyes, such that they are veiled from [the path of] guidance." Concerning *they have ears with which they do not hear* (7:179) he said: "A deafness is placed in their ears, such that they do not hear [the voice of] guidance."[3]

(8) The Messenger of God said: God created the people in darkness. Then He cast some of His light upon them. Whomever that light

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1 *Majmaʿ al-bayān*, on the authority of Saʿīd b. al-Musayyab.

2 *Majmaʿ al-bayān*.

3 *Tafsīr al-Qummī*, on the authority of Abū al-Jārūd.

struck was guided. Whomever that light missed strayed.[1]

(9) The Messenger of God said: God created the jinn into three categories: (1) One group are snakes, scorpions and the insects of the earth. (2) One group are like the wind in the air. (3) One group will be held accountable for retribution. And God created humankind into three categories: (1) One group are like livestock, as He says: *they have hearts with which they do not understand, they have eyes with which they do not see, they have ears with which they do not hear. They are like cattle; rather, they are more astray* (7:179). (2) One group have the bodies of humans but the souls of devils. (3) One group shall be safe under God's shade, on a day when there shall be no shade except His.[2]

Author's comment: We shall have a discussion on the jinn and human devils in its appropriate place, by God's will.

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1 *Al-Durr al-manthūr*, on the authority of al-Bayhaqī's al-Asmāʾ wa al-Ṣifāt, on the authority of ʿAbd-Allāh b. ʿAmr b. ʿĀṣ.

2 *Al-Durr al-manthūr*, on the authority of al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī, Ibn Abī al-Dunyā's *Makāʾid al-Shayṭān*, Abū Yaʿlá, Ibn Abī Ḥātim, Abū al-Shaykh and Ibn Mardawayh, on the authority of Abū al-Dardāʾ.

Verses 180-186

وَ لِلَّهِ الْأَسْماءُ الْحُسْنى فَادْعُوهُ بِها وَ ذَرُوا الَّذِينَ يُلْحِدُونَ فِي أَسْمائِهِ سَيُجْزَوْنَ
ما كانُوا يَعْمَلُونَ ﴿١٨٠﴾ وَ مِمَّنْ خَلَقْنا أُمَّةٌ يَهْدُونَ بِالْحَقِّ وَ بِهِ يَعْدِلُونَ ﴿١٨١﴾ وَ الَّذِينَ
كَذَّبُوا بِآياتِنا سَنَسْتَدْرِجُهُمْ مِنْ حَيْثُ لا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿١٨٢﴾ وَ أُمْلِي لَهُمْ إِنَّ كَيْدِي
مَتِينٌ ﴿١٨٣﴾ أَ وَ لَمْ يَتَفَكَّرُوا ما بِصاحِبِهِمْ مِنْ جِنَّةٍ إِنْ هُوَ إِلاَّ نَذِيرٌ مُبِينٌ ﴿١٨٤﴾ أَ وَ لَمْ
يَنْظُرُوا فِي مَلَكُوتِ السَّماواتِ وَ الْأَرْضِ وَ ما خَلَقَ اللَّهُ مِنْ شَيْءٍ وَ أَنْ عَسى
أَنْ يَكُونَ قَدِ اقْتَرَبَ أَجَلُهُمْ فَبِأَيِّ حَدِيثٍ بَعْدَهُ يُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿١٨٥﴾ مَنْ يُضْلِلِ اللَّهُ
فَلا هادِيَ لَهُ وَ يَذَرُهُمْ فِي طُغْيانِهِمْ يَعْمَهُونَ ﴿١٨٦﴾

(7:180) *To Allah belong the most excellent names, so supplicate Him by them, and abandon those who commit sacrilege in His names. Soon they shall be requited for what they used to do.*

(7:181) *Among those We have created are a nation who guide by the truth and do justice thereby.*

(7:182) *As for those who deny Our signs, We will draw them imperceptibly [into ruin], whence they do not know.*

(7:183) *And I will grant them respite, for My devising is indeed sure.*

(7:184) *Have they not reflected that there is no madness in their companion, [and that] he is just a manifest warner?*

(7:185) *Have they not contemplated the kingdom of the heavens and the earth, and whatever things Allah has created, and that maybe their time has already drawn near? So what discourse will they believe after this?!*

(7:186) *Whomever Allah leads astray has no guide, and He leaves them bewildered in their rebellion.*

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Introduction

This section builds on the last section by defining the criterion of guidance and error: it is whether one calls God by His excellent names, or commits sacrilege with respect to His names. All people—whether religious or atheist, educated or illiterate—acknowledge God through their *fiṭrah* (primal nature, innate disposition, initial makeup). They know intuitively that this visible world depends on a reality that upholds all its parts and gives order to it. That reality is God, from Whom everything originates, and to Whom everything returns. He is the One Who bestows upon the world any beauty or perfection that it has. All is from Him and belongs to Him. Notwithstanding this essential agreement, people can be classified into three groups with respect to their view of God:

(1) Some people describe God with names that are only befitting of Him. These are names that affirm all perfection for God, and negate all defect and deficiency from Him.

(2) Some people commit sacrilege in His names, meaning that they distort the divine names and ascribe them to other beings. Here are some examples of such people:

(a) Atheists and materialists: they ascribe qualities that are exclusively God's—such as creating, giving life, and providing sustenance—to nature or matter.
(b) Idol-worshipers: they ascribe good and prosperity to their gods.
(c) Some People of the Book, who describe their prophets or saints with divine qualities.
(d) Some believers [that is, Muslims in particular, or monotheists more generally] who treat the means and instruments in the world as independent causes, while the only independent force in the world is God.

(3) Some people believe in God, but they too commit sacrilege in His names through ascribing certain qualities and actions to Him that are not befitting of Him. Here are some examples of such beliefs:

(a) God is physical.
(b) He has a location.
(c) He can be perceived with our senses in certain conditions.
(d) His knowledge, will and power are like our knowledge, will and power.
(e) His existence endures in time.

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(f) It is possible for wrong actions or ignorant rulings to issue from Him.

All of these are forms of committing sacrilege with respect to His names.

These three groups can be further generalized into two groups in reality: (i) One group calls God through His excellent names. They worship Allah, Who is possessor of glory and grace. They are those who are guided to the truth. (ii) Another group commits sacrilege in His name, through either applying His names to other beings, or applying their names to Him. They are straying, and their path leads to hell, although they are at different levels and degrees of error.

God further clarifies that all guidance is from Him. Guidance is a positive quality, and its reality belongs to God. Meanwhile, it is not possible to attribute *ḍalāl* (misguidance, straying, error) to God whatsoever. The reality of *ḍalāl* is lacking God's guidance, which makes it a privative and non-existential quality. Yet, sometimes it is used as a quality that the person "possesses" or an inseparable trait of a soul. What is meant in these cases is being deprived and cut off from God's blessing. This is itself a divine punishment for those who choose error over guidance. It is how God penalizes those who reject His signs and communications. It is in this sense that the Qur'an attributes *ḍalāl* to God. His role here is to give them respite (*imlāʾ*) and lead them step-by-step into temptation (*istidrāj*).

The previous set of verses said that guidance and error are all from God [7:178]. These verses elaborate on the essence and reality of that. They clarify that one's guidance depends on calling God by His excellent names—and all excellent names belong to God—while one's error is a result of committing sacrilege in His names. A group of people are guided by God's guidance, such that they do not deviate from Him to others. And a group of people stray, deviate from His names, and deny His signs. God drives the second group to hell because of denying His signs and communications, as He said: *Certainly We have created for hell many of the jinn and humans…* (7:179). He does this through a gradual process of leaving them on their own and giving them respite.

Commentary

وَ لِلّٰهِ الْأَسْماءُ الْحُسْنى فَادْعُوهُ بِها وَ ذَرُوا الَّذِينَ يُلْحِدُونَ فِي أَسْمائِهِ سَيُجْزَوْنَ

ما كانُوا يَعْمَلُونَ ﴿١٨٠﴾

(7:180) ***To Allah belong the most excellent names*** **(al-asmāʾ al-ḥusná)*****, so supplicate Him by them, and abandon those who commit sacrilege in His names. Soon they shall be requited for what they used to do.***

Linguistically speaking, the word *ism* (name, noun) is something that serves to denote and indicate something. This can be in two ways: (1) Sometimes it is a word that indicates a certain meaning, such as non-proper nouns. (2) Sometimes it is a proper noun that refers to a certain being, such as Zayd and ʿAmr. The latter is especially true about improvised proper nouns [which are unprecedented by any particular meaning]. The word *al-ḥusná* is the feminine form of *aḥsan* (best, most beautiful, most excellent). This shows that what is meant by "names" here is not merely proper names, but names that indicate a meaning and describe the qualities of the being. In fact, one may question whether *any* of God's names is purely a proper name. Furthermore, the verse is not merely about meaningful and descriptive names, but names that have an element of *ḥusn* (goodness, beauty, excellence); and not just that, but the highest degree of *ḥusn* when compared to other names with respect to God. For instance, "courageous" and "self-restrained" are good qualities, but they are not applicable to God's sanctity since they imply an integral element of physicality that cannot be stripped from them. If such elements [of deficiency and materiality] can be divested of a name, then it can be applied to God, such as *al-Jawād* (the Generous), *al-ʿAdl* (the All-Just) and *al-Raḥīm* (the Ever-Merciful).

Therefore, an "excellent name" of God would be a name that has two properties: (1) It denotes a quality of perfection. (2) It is free from all defect, and unmixed with any non-existential aspect, unless it can be divested and abstracted from that aspect. The second condition refers to anything that implies some need or deficiency on the part of God, such as being physical, having physical properties,[1] committing evil, being unjust or having a lack.

It should be noted that all divine names are still part of our language.

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1 For the difference between being physical and having physical properties, see my first footnote on the section titled "What is Meant by Seeing" above, under verses 7:138-154. (Trans.)

They are words that we have designed for human applications, which always have an element of limitation, need and imperfection. However, even though all these names and qualities originate from the limited world of human existence, they can be classified into two types: (1) There are some concepts that are *inherently* limited, such that we cannot negate their element of need and deficiency. Some examples are body, color and size. (2) There are other concepts that can be divested from human limitations, such as knowledge, power and life. In the case of human knowledge, we develop a mental image of something from the outside world through our physical senses. Our knowledge is to conceptually encompass that mental image. Human power is the capacity to act through the physical movement of our muscles. Human life is our state of having knowledge and power through the means and instruments of each. None of these qualities is befitting of God, but we can strip their material aspects from their core meanings. Then knowledge would be encompassing something through the presence of that thing before the knower. Power would be the capacity to give existence to something. And life would be the quality of having knowledge and power.[1] These abstracted meanings can be safely applied to God, since they are free from the human aspects of limitation and need.

Based on both rational proof and scriptural evidence, all qualities of perfection belong to God. He is the One Who bestows[2] these qualities upon other beings without any previous model or example to follow. Hence, God is Knowledgeable, Powerful, and Living. He does not possess these attributes in the way that we do, but in a way that is appropriate to His precinct of sanctity, which means the reality and essence of these perfections, without any element of imperfection.

The verse literally says, "Belong to God the most excellent names," where the predicate (Belong to God) precedes the subject (the most excellent names). This way of expression indicates exclusivity. *Al-asmāʾ* is a plural noun (*asmāʾ*) used with the article *al-*. Such usage shows universality and encompassment. This means that *all* beautiful names in existence belong to God *alone*, and no one else has any part in them. Nevertheless,

1 Knowledge and power can also be interpreted as consciousness and force, respectively. (Trans.)

2 "Bestows" can be interpreted as "manifests" for more mystical and metaphysical accuracy. (Trans.)

we see [in the Qur'an] that God sometimes describes others with these qualities—such as knowledge, life, creation and mercy. Therefore, what is meant here is that the *reality* of these qualities exclusively belongs to Him.

This is confirmed by the apparent meaning—or rather, by the explicit text—of many verses, such as: *that power, altogether, belongs to Allah* (2:165); *all honor belongs to Allah* (4:139); *they do not comprehend anything of His knowledge except what He wills* (2:255); *He is the Living One, there is no god except Him* (40:65). These verses show that the reality of any quality of excellence and perfection belongs to God alone. No other being has any share of these qualities except to the extent and in the way that He bestows upon them according to His will.

The same can be inferred from other verses that talk about God's names in plural: *Allah—there is no god except Him—to Him belong the most excellent names* (20:8); *Say: Invoke "Allah" or invoke "the All-Merciful." Whichever [of His Names] you may invoke, to Him belong the most excellent names* (17:110); *To Him belong the most excellent names. Whatever there is in the heavens glorifies Him and [whatever there is in] the earth* (59:24). The apparent meaning of all these verses is that the reality of any beautiful name belongs to God alone.

Some exegetes have suggested that the article *al-* in *al-asmāʾ* ["the" in *the most excellent names*] is a definite article.[1] However, this is an unwarranted interpretation, and there is no evidence for it in the verses. This interpretation stems from certain narrations which enumerate the most excellent names of God. We shall discuss them in our next examination of the narrations, by God's will.

… so supplicate Him* (fa-udʿūhu, from daʿwah) *by them…: The word *daʿwah* can have three meanings: (1) Naming. When someone is given a certain name or title, it is said: *daʿawtuhu Zaydan* or *daʿawtuka ʿAbd-Allāh*.[2] (2) Calling. The meaning would be: Call God by these names like O All-Merciful, O Ever-Merciful. (3) Worshiping. The meaning would be: Worship God while you admit that He possesses these excellent qualities and beautiful meanings.

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1 In other words, the verse is not saying that "all excellent names belong to God," but it is saying that "certain excellent names which are already known to the audience belong to Him." (Trans.)

2 The meaning would be: "Use these excellent names to refer to God." (Trans.)

Exegetes have offered all of the above three interpretations, but the usage of *duʿāʾ* in other similar contexts in the Qur'an favors the last. Here are a few examples:

(i) A verse that we already quoted above: *Say: Invoke* (udʿū) *"Allah" or invoke "the All-Merciful." Whichever [of His Names] you may invoke, to Him belong the most excellent names* (17:110).

(ii) *Your Lord has said, "Call Me* (udʿūnī)*, and I will answer you!" Indeed those who are disdainful of My worship* (ʿibādatī) *will enter hell in utter disgrace* (40:60). In this verse, the words *duʿāʾ* (call) and *ʿibādah* (worship, service) are used interchangeably.

(iii) Another similar substitution is found in these verses: *Who is more astray than him who invokes* (yadʿū) *besides Allah such as would not respond to him until the Day of Resurrection, and who are oblivious of their invocation* (duʿāʾihim)*? When humankind are mustered [on the Day of Judgement] they will be their enemies, and they will disavow their worship* (ʿibādatihim) (46:5-6).

(iv) *He is the Living One, there is no god except Him. So supplicate Him* (fa-udʿūhu)*, putting exclusive faith in Him* (40:65). What is meant here is exclusive worship (*ʿibādah*) of God.

The above interpretation is also confirmed by the subsequent part of this very verse: *and abandon those who commit sacrilege in His names. Soon they shall be requited for what they used to do* (7:180). The verse talks about being requited for their *actions*. If the intended meaning of *supplicate Him by them* was that "you should give these names to God" or "you should call Him with these names" then the verse should have ended by referring to their speech and descriptions—much like the verse: *Soon He will requite them for their descriptions* (waṣfahum) (6:139)—not by referring to their *actions*. Nevertheless, naming and calling are also implications of worship.

The meaning is: "All names that are the best of names belong to God. So worship Him and turn to Him through these names." God knows best.

… and abandon those who commit sacrilege* (yulḥidūna) *in His names…: The word in the verse can be recited as either *yalḥadūna*, derived from *laḥd*; or as *yulḥidūna*, derived from *ilḥād* (following the transitive verbal pattern *ifʿāl*). The two are synonymous. Both *laḥd* and *ilḥād* mean "inclining from the middle to one side." *Laḥad* is a part of a grave that is on one side, as opposed to *ḍarīḥ*, which is in the middle. It is narrated from some lexicographers that *laḥd* means "inclining to one side," while

ilḥād means "dispute, quarrel."

… Soon they shall be requited for what they used to do: This part of the verse is not connected to the previous part with a conjunction [like and, or, then, so, because]. The reason for this is that the sentence serves to answer an implied question (called a prolepsis). When the verse says: *abandon those who commit sacrilege in His names*, one would naturally ask, "What will happen to them?" The verse explains: *Soon they shall be requited for what they used to do*.

There is more to discuss on the topic of God's most excellent names, which we shall continue after we finish the exposition of this set of verses, by God's will.

وَ مِمَّنْ خَلَقْنا أُمَّةٌ يَهْدُونَ بِالْحَقِّ وَ بِهِ يَعْدِلُونَ ﴿١٨١﴾

(7:181) ***Among those We have created are a nation who guide by the truth and do justice thereby.***

We discussed some of the points relating to this verse under a similar verse above: *Among the people of Moses is a nation who guide [the people] by the truth and do justice thereby* (7:159). The current verse is in a set of verses that divide all humankind into either guided or misguided. Based on the previous verse, the criterion for this division is whether one calls God through the best names that befit Him, or one commits sacrilege with respect to His names. The verse is saying that humankind consists of some group—either small or large—that are truly guided.

What is intended here is genuine guidance and misguidance, which are attributable to God's doing: *Whomever Allah guides is rightly guided* (al-muhtadī)*, and whomever He leads astray—it is they who are the losers* (7:178). *Muhtadī* is derived from *ihtidāʾ* (being guided, receiving guidance). If one is truly guided (*muhtadī*), it shows that the person has received genuine guidance (*hidāyah*), which can only come from God as its sole possessor.

God's act of guidance does not fail or miss its objective in any way. It secures one from error and straying. We discussed this under other verses such as: *So if these disbelieve in them, We have certainly entrusted them to a people who will never disbelieve in them* (6:89). Furthermore, one who guides to the truth cannot receive guidance from anyone other than God. This is inferred from the verse: *Is He who guides to the truth worthier to be followed, or he who guides not unless he is [himself] guided?* (10:35). The

reader should reflect on this.

Given the above explanations, the ascription of guidance to the nation mentioned in this verse shows that they are immune from error and fault through clinging and subscribing to God. This can be interpreted in two ways: (1) The entire nation in this verse has this infallibility, which means that the verse is specifically about the prophets and saints. (2) The verse uses the quality of some members of a group to describe the whole. There are other examples of this usage in the Qur'an: *Certainly We gave the Children of Israel the Book, judgement and prophethood* (45:16); *He [God] made you [O Children of Israel] kings* (5:20); *that you may be witnesses to the people* (2:143). In these verses, only a subset of the audience is characterized by the qualities described in the verse. God knows best.

The meaning is: We do not expect from you something that is unfeasible and beyond human capability, because among those We have created are a nation who are genuinely covered with divine guidance, and who guide to the truth. This is because God has blessed them with His particular guidance.

وَ الَّذِينَ كَذَّبُوا بِآياتِنا سَنَسْتَدْرِجُهُمْ مِنْ حَيْثُ لا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿١٨٢﴾

(7:182) ***As for those who deny Our signs, We will draw them imperceptibly [into ruin]*** **(sa-nastadrijuhum, from istidrāj)**, ***whence they do not know.***

Istidrāj is "to raise or lower something or someone step by step." It is to gradually approach something or some place. Given the verse's context, what is meant here is to approach ruin and destruction, either in this world or in the hereafter.

… whence they do not know: This qualification means that they do not see, feel, or realize their gradual damnation. This is because they are completely engrossed in the apparent glamor, pleasures and occupations of the material life.

There are two possible interpretations for *istidrāj* (gradual ruin) in this verse:

(1) They constantly get closer to their own destruction through adding to their wrongdoing, but they do not pause to reflect on their grim end since God keeps renewing and perpetuating His material bounties upon them. We discussed this idea under the verses: *Then We changed the evil for good until they multiplied [in numbers]* (7:95); *Never be misled by the*

bustle of the faithless in the towns. It is a trivial enjoyment; then their refuge is hell, and it is an evil resting place (3:196-197).[1]

(2) Those who deny the signs and communications of God cut off themselves from the remembrance of their Lord. They cling to the apparent means and instruments in order to secure themselves. As a result, they lose inner peace and the composure of the heart. This is their punishment; they are afflicted by inner agitation, anxiety and stress. The means and sources that they hope in will fail them, and difficulties will pile up on them. They think that this is what life is all about, not realizing the true meaning of a blissful life. Hence they fall into a vicious cycle: they continue seeking and accumulating the adornments of this world, and see that as an extension and increase of blessings upon them. But that only adds to their punishment, until they eventually land on eternal punishment in the hereafter, which *will be most calamitous and bitter* (54:46). This is how they are on a slippery slope toward punishment from when they deny the signs and communications of their Lord, *until they encounter their day, which they are promised* (43:83, 70:42).

The second interpretation can be matched with these verses: *Lo! The hearts find rest in Allah's remembrance* (13:28); *But whoever disregards My remembrance, he shall have a tight life* (20:124); *So let not their wealth and children impress you: Allah only desires to punish them with these in the life of this world, and that their souls may depart while they are faithless* (9:55). However, this sense of *istidrāj* is not compatible with the next verse: *And I will grant them respite* (7:183). Hence, we must go with the first interpretation.

وَ أُمْلِي لَهُمْ إِنَّ كَيْدِي مَتِينٌ ﴿١٨٣﴾

(7:183) *And I will grant them respite* (umlī, from imlāʾ), *for My devising is indeed sure.*

Imlāʾ is synonymous with *imhāl* (to postpone, to delay, to extend). This verse involves a shift of address from the first person plural to the first person singular. There are two explanations for this shift: (1) It shows extra emphasis on their deprivation of divine mercy, and their leading

1 See volume 7 (1st ed.), p. 131 of the English translation, and the very first part of the current volume. (Trans.)

into damnation.[1] (2) The verse is about postponing their judgment and punishment until their appointed time. This is more elaborately stated in the verse: *were it not for a prior decree of your Lord [granting them reprieve] until a specified time, decision would have been made between them* (42:14). That is what God said to Adam upon his fall on the earth: *On the earth shall be your abode and sustenance for a time* (2:36). This is a decree of God's that is attributable to Him alone. That is why it is expressed in the first person singular. However, in the case of *istidrāj*, which means bestowing and renewing blessings one after another upon the servant, God's angels are also involved as intermediaries. That is why the last verse was in the first person plural.

… for My devising is indeed sure: This sentence explains and justifies both the last verse and the current one. This part is also in the first person singular because it encompasses both *istidrāj* (gradual ruin through blessings) and *imhāl* (giving respite).

أَ وَ لَمْ يَتَفَكَّرُوا ما بِصاحِبِهِمْ مِنْ جِنَّةٍ إِنْ هُوَ إِلاَّ نَذِيرٌ مُبِينٌ ﴿١٨٤﴾

(7:184) ***Have they not reflected that there is no madness* (jinnah) *in their companion, [and that] he is just a manifest warner?***

There is much disagreement among the exegetes about the composition of this verse. The most apparent and direct meaning that springs to the mind, given the context, is that the verse consists of two complete sentences: (1) *Have they not reflected?* This is a rhetorical question which implies a negation and rebuke. (2) *There is no madness in their companion*. This is a confirmation of the Prophet's claim to prophethood. Meanwhile, the second sentence also clarifies what the audience should reflect upon.

The verse can be elaborated as follows: Have they not reflect on the fact that their companion is not a madman—so that this fact would become clear to them? Indeed, there is no madness in him, for he is only a manifest warner.

By referring to the prophet as their companion (*ṣāḥib*), the verse gives them direction on how to reflect. It is pointing out that the Prophet was among them and in their company throughout his life. So if there were any madness in him, they would have surely known by now. This proves

1 It is as though the speaker (God) is personally taking charge of this affair. (Trans.)

that the news that he has brought is a message of warning, not a symptom of madness.

It is said that *jinnah* is a specific *kind* of madness. Another possibility is that it means a *person* of the jinn. This is based on a common belief at the time that madness is when one of the jinn enters the person and talks using the madman's tongue.

أَ وَ لَمْ يَنْظُرُوا فِي مَلَكُوتِ السَّماواتِ وَ الْأَرْضِ وَ ما خَلَقَ اللَّهُ مِنْ شَيْءٍ وَ أَنْ عَسى أَنْ يَكُونَ قَدِ اقْتَرَبَ أَجَلُهُمْ فَبِأَيِّ حَدِيثٍ بَعْدَهُ يُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿١٨٥﴾

(7:185) ***Have they not contemplated the kingdom* (malakūt) *of the heavens and the earth, and whatever things Allah has created, and that maybe their time has already drawn near? So what discourse will they believe after this?!***

As we discussed previously, *malakūt* in the Qur'an refers to the inner aspect of things, through which they face and connect to their Lord. This is deduced from these verses: *All His command, when He wills something, is to say to it "Be," and it is. So glory be to Him in Whose hand is the kingdom* (malakūt) *of all things* (36:82-83). Moreover, observing this divine aspect of things is a necessary concomitant of *yaqīn* (certitude, conviction). This is inferred from the verse: *Thus did We show Abraham the kingdom* (malakūt) *of the heavens and the earth, that he might be of those who possess certitude* (6:75).[1]

The verse reprimands the audience for neglecting and turning away from the divine aspect of things. Why are they oblivious of this aspect? Why do they not look into it, so that it may realize that the Prophet is calling them to the truth?

… and whatever things Allah has created…: The conjunction "and" joins this phrase to *the heavens* in the previous part. The verse literally says, "And what God has created of anything," where "of anything" (*min shay'*) describes and clarifies "what" (*mā*).

The meaning is: Why do they not reflect on the creation of the heavens,

1 See volume 1 (1st ed.), p. 191, under verse 2:29; volume 2 (1st ed.), pp. 80-81, under verse 2:124; and volume 13 (1st ed.), pp. 217ff, under verse 6:75, of the English translation. Also, see verses 7:172-174 above, just before the section titled "Back to the Verse." (Trans.)

the earth, and anything else that God has created? Not in the sense that they are particular objects—which only leads one to a scientific knowledge of their physical properties—but in the sense that they are dependent beings, that they are connected to another source, that they are in need of a Lord Who directs their affairs and the affairs of all things. That is the Lord of the worlds.

… and that maybe their time has already drawn near…: The verse literally says, "And the possible closing on them of their time," which is treated as a singular noun.[1] That is why the conjunction "and" is used to add this entire phrase [as a single item] to *kingdom* in the previous part of the verse.

The implied meaning is: "Do they not contemplate on the fact that their death might have drawn near?" Taking this possibility into account could awaken them and help them stop continuously straying in error. Indeed, the forgetting of death is the primary motive that diverts people's attention from building their eternal life and makes them fall prey to the illusions of this world. Death is a reality that one does not know when it shall occur. If one only realizes that they have no idea about their time of death, and that it could be any time, then that would uproot their inadvertence, and would prevent them from following their desires and prolonging their hopes.

… So what discourse will they believe after this?!: This means that it is rather hopeless that they would believe. Given the context, the demonstrative pronoun "this" refers to the Qur'an. God has manifested Himself to the people through His speech—the Qur'an—which comprises of rational arguments and moral admonitions that stand to reason. At the same time, the Qur'an is also a clear miracle. Now, if they do not believe in the religion despite the Qur'an, they will not believe by any other means. As God says elsewhere, He has sealed their hearts, so they do not understand the message of guidance, and do not believe in the truth. Thus He says in the next verse: *Whomever Allah leads astray has no guide* (7:186).

مَنْ يُضْلِلِ اللَّهُ فَلا هادِيَ لَهُ وَ يَذَرُهُمْ فِي طُغْيانِهِمْ يَعْمَهُونَ ﴿١٨٦﴾

(7:186) *Whomever Allah leads astray has no guide, and He leaves*

1 The Arabic particle *an* (that) in *an yakūna* is called an *maṣdariyyah*. It serves to turn the verb that follows it into a maṣdar (gerund, infinitive noun). (Trans.)

them bewildered* (yaʿmaḥūna, from ʿamah) *in their rebellion.

There are two possible meanings for *ʿamah*: (1) wandering in error; (2) lack of understanding. The complement of this verse is: "Whomever God guides, no one can mislead." This is not mentioned here because the verse serves as an explanation and justification for the last verse: *So what discourse will they believe…?* (7:185). It is as though one has asked, "Why is it that they do not believe?" and this verse explains: "Because *whomever Allah leads astray…*"

Discussion on the Excellent Names of God

1. What is Meant by the Divine Names and How Can We Know Them?

When we open our eyes, the first thing we get to know is ourselves and the closest things to us. We realize our relation to the outside world based on our need for survival. We notice our organs, faculties and functions that revolve around this need. Those are the first elements of our knowledge. It does not take long for us to find ourselves as needy beings that do not sustain themselves. And so are our faculties and functions. "Need" is one of the first things that we observe in ourselves, as well as in all other things, including our faculties, our functions, and the outside world. Thus we intuitively arrive at a source that fulfills our needs and removes our deficiency. That is God, Who is the end point of all needs and relations. This primary observation and inference of ours is confirmed by the verse: *O humankind! You are the ones who stand in need of Allah, and Allah—He is the Ever-Sufficient* (35:15).

History is incapable of pinpointing the origin of the human belief in a deity. As one traces humankind to the most ancient people, one continues to find the belief in some supernatural forces that they subscribed to. For instance, such beliefs have been discovered in the aboriginals of the Americas and Australia who lead primitive lives in simple communities. They all believe in some deity, although some might have gone astray with the exact application of this belief. This shows that the belief in some origin—from whom all things emanate—is a necessary requirement of the human *fiṭrah* (original intuition, primal nature, initial makeup). If one does not arrive at it this, it shows a deviation from one's *fiṭrah*. That is like one who accustoms themself to a toxic substance: their physical

nature opposes that at first, but they persist until the substance becomes enjoyable to them.

One of the most basic principles of theology is that the existence of all things traces to God. This means that God possesses everything; otherwise, He would not be able to bestow and confer it on others. Nevertheless, the reality of certain things is a sense of need; they indicate an element of imperfection. God, however, is free from all need and imperfection, because He is the Source Whom all beings depend on to fulfill their need and complete their imperfection. This clarifies that God is the absolute holder of all *mulk* (kingdom, sovereignty) and *milk* (ownership, possession). To Him belongs any quality of perfection that we find in existence, such as life, power, knowledge, hearing, sight, sustenance, mercy, might, and so on.

This is how we can arrive at the names and attributes of God. For instance:

(i) He is Ever-Living, Omnipotent, Omniscient, Ever-Hearing and Ever-Seeing, because otherwise He would be imperfect. But He is clear of all imperfection.

(ii) He is the Sustainer, the Ever-Merciful, the Ever-Mighty, the Life-Giver, the Death-Giver, the Originator, the Returner and the Resurrector. These are His attributes of action. He possesses these qualities because these acts—giving sustenance, showing mercy, being mighty, giving life, giving death, originating, returning and resurrecting—are *His* acts.

(iii) He is the All-Glorious, the All-Sacred, the Ever-Sublime, the Ever-Great and the Supreme. These names serve to negate from Him all non-existential traits and anything that indicates some deficiency.

The above is how we can prove the divine names and attributes in a straightforward way. The Qur'an confirms this through attributing *mulk* (kingdom, sovereignty) and *milk* (ownership, possession) to God in their absolute sense. There are numerous verses to this effect, which we do not need to quote here.

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2. Defining the Divine Names and Attributes

There are some aspects of lack that we find in various parts of the world, such as death, deficiency, poverty, abasement, impotence, ignorance, and so on. As we clarified in the last part, we negate these qualities

of imperfection from God. Now we should add that the negation of some imperfection reduces to the affirmation of its opposite perfection. For instance, negating poverty means affirming richness; negating dishonor means affirming honor; negating weakness means affirming power; and negating ignorance means affirming knowledge.

We also said that we attribute qualities of perfection to God, such as life, power and knowledge. This is because all perfections in existence emanate from Him. Meanwhile, sometimes there are some aspects of deficiency and imperfection that accompany certain qualities of perfection in some of their instances and applications. We should also negate these aspects from God. For example, consider knowledge. Our knowledge is to conceptually encompass a mental image of an object that we obtain from the outside world through our physical senses. There are some elements of this process that do not befit God, such as the prior existence of the object in the outside, the intermediation of a mental image, and the need of physical organs and senses. These are due to some deficiency in our existence, while God is free from that. What is applicable to Him is the essence and reality of knowledge, which is to encompass something through the presence of that thing. In short, whenever there is an instance of a positive quality, we should affirm for God its core, which is an existential perfection; and we should negate from Him the aspects that boil down to some need or imperfection.

There remains another imperfection that we must negate from God: being limited and defined. If something is limited in any aspect of its existence, it means that there is some greater being that has defined and confined it from outside, for something cannot limit itself. Hence, we also negate all limits and boundaries from God. This means that God is not limited by anything, whether in His essence or in His qualities. That is what He says in the Qur'an: *He is the One, the All-Dominant* (13:16). This means that His oneness is such oneness that dominates everything. So He is the Being that encompasses all other beings, but Himself is not encompassed by any boundary.

Based on this negation of limits, we arrive at another conclusion: The divine attributes are identical with one another, and they are all identical with the divine essence. They differ only conceptually, but they all refer to the same external reality. If His knowledge, for instance, were different from His power, or if any of His attributes were different from His

essence—as is the case in us humans—then that would mean that His attributes and His essence restrict one another. Then one would be limited, and the other would be its limitation; one would be bounded, and the other would be its boundary. This would mean that the divine essence is composed, and needs some boundaries to define it. However, God is free from having components and limits. This is the quality of divine oneness (*aḥadiyyah*), which does not accept any division whatsoever, and does not take on any external or mental multiplicity.

Some scholars favor an apophatic theology, which says:

All divine attributes should be interpreted as negations, because we must clear Him of the qualities of His creation. Hence, when we say that God has knowledge, power and life, what is meant is that He is free from ignorance, impotence and death. The same goes with the other divine attributes.

Our explanations above should clarify the problem with this view. This view necessitates a negation of all qualities of perfection from God, which is against both our intuitive understanding, and the apparent text of the Qur'an. There are also other similarly implausible views in this regard, such as:

(i) The divine attributes are additional and external to the divine essence.

(ii) We should negate all attributes from God, and only affirm the impacts and effects of those attributes for Him.

All such views are contrary to our intuitive understanding. A more elaborate discussion of them is beyond the scope of the current work.

3. The Classifications of the Divine Names and Attributes

a) Affirmative and Negational Attributes

As we said above, through our intuitive quest, we arrive at certain attributes of God that have an affirmative nature, such as life and knowledge. These attributes denote divine perfections. He also has some negational attributes, such as *al-Quddūs* (the All-Sacred) and *al-Subbūḥ* (the All-Glorified). These attributes denote *tanzīh* (incomparability, transcendence). Hence, the divine attributes can be classified in two categories: *thubūtiyyah* (affirmative, positive) and *salbiyyah* (negational, negative, apophatic).

b) Attributes of Essence and Attribute of Action

The divine attributes can also be classified as attributes of essence, and attributes of action. The former are qualities that are identical with the divine essence, such as life, power and essential knowledge. The latter are qualities that are additional and external to the divine essence, such as creation and sustenance. The divine essence takes precedence to them in existence. These qualities are extracted and derived from divine actions.

Here is an example to illustrate what is meant by derivation here: Consider all the bounties and blessings that we have and enjoy. They can be compared to rations that a king allots to his soldiers. We call these blessings "sustenance" (*rizq*), and we call God "the Sustainer" (*al-Rāziq*). The same can be said about other qualities of action, such as creation, mercy and forgiveness. These qualities are applied to God, and we derive names for Him based on them, but their meanings are not found in Him in the same way that His essential attributes are found in Him, such as life and power. If the divine essence were really characterized by these qualities, then they would also be attributes of essence, not something external to God's essence. In short, the divine attributes can also be classified as either attributes of essence or attributes of action.

c) Non-Relational, Relational, and Purely Relational Attributes

Some of God's attributes have an independent reality of their own, without being tied to anything outside the divine essence, such as life. These are called *nafsiyyah* (independent, absolute, non-relational). They do not bear some relation to anything outside the divine essence. There are other attributes which also denote an independent quality, but that quality is relational, such as creation (*khalq*) and fashioning (*ṣunᶜ*). These are called *dhāt iḍāfah* (with relation). Finally, there are some attributes that denote a purely relational meaning, such as creatorship (*khāliqiyyah*) and sustainership (*rāziqiyyah*). These are called *iḍāfiyyah maḥḍah* (purely relational).[1]

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1 The third type (*iḍāfiyyah maḥḍah*) is derived from the second type (*dhāt iḍāfah*). For instance, "knowledge" denotes a quality that has an independent meaning of its own. However, that is a relational meaning, as it is always used with "of" or "about" (the letter *bāʾ* in Arabic). For example, we say: "He knows about…" or "He is knowledgeable of…" If we only look at the relation between the knower and the known, then we can derive the two qualities of "knowership" (*ᶜālimiyyah*) and "knownship" (*maᶜlūmiyyah*). These are purely relational qualities: they do not denote a meaning that stands on its own.

d) Exclusive and Common Names

There are some divine names that are only used for God, as it is said about *Allāh* and *al-Raḥmān*. *Allāh* denotes God as a proper noun, not through its lexical meaning. *Al-Raḥmān* is among the most excellent names of God, in the sense that its meaning [of mercy] is also found among God's creatures, as we discussed above.[1] This is what we can say within the scope of *tafsīr* (exposition, commentary) of the Qur'an. There is also a legal discussion here, which is beyond the scope of this book.

4. The Relation of the Divine Names and Attributes to Us and to Themselves

There is no real difference between a *ṣifah* (attribute, quality) and an *ism* (name). Their distinction is in terms of what they *primarily* denote. In the case of an attribute, what comes first is a meaning or quality that is found in some essence, whether that is a separable or inseparable aspect of the essence. In the case of a name, what comes first is the essence itself, although it is viewed in the sense that it bears a certain quality. Therefore, "life" and "knowledge" are attributes, while "living" and "knowledgeable" are names. The function of a word is to denote and indicate a meaning. This means that the reality of an attribute is not its letters, but the meaning that the letters indicate. Similarly, the reality of a name is the meaning indicated by that word. For instance, the reality of God's quality of life is not the word "life" but the meaning that corresponds to them. In this case, that reality is the very essence of God, which is identical with divine life. Hence, the words "life" and "living" are both only "names"[2] that denote their corresponding meanings. The actual attributes and names of God are not the letters and sounds, but the reality and meaning indicated by them.

We said above that, following our intuitive approach, we discover the divine names through observing certain qualities of perfection in existence. From this we can know that God certainly has these qualities, because He is the One Who bestows them upon us. Similarly, by observing

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(Trans.)

1 This refers to the author's intuitive method, where we deduce the names and attributes of God by observing the perfections and imperfections in the world. (Trans.)

2 What is meant by "name" here is some symbol and indication. (Trans.)

limitations and deficiencies in the world, we realize that God is clear from them, and is characterized by their opposite qualities of perfection. That is how He fulfills our needs and removes our imperfections. For example, when we observe knowledge and power in the world of existence, we ascertain that God possesses knowledge and power, through which He bestows these qualities upon His creation. Similarly, when we observe ignorance and impotence, we deduce that He is free from them, but is characterized by their opposites, which would be knowledge and power. Through them He removes our need of knowledge and impotence. The same analysis can be applied to the other divine attributes.

From this we can deduce an important realization: It is through the divine attributes that God's creation connects to Him and receives various aspects of existence. In other words, the divine attributes are intermediaries between the divine essence and His creation. If we have knowledge, power, sustenance and comfort, we receive them from God *in the sense that* He is Knowledgeable, Powerful, Sustainer and Comforter. Similarly, it is His knowledge that removes our ignorance; it is His power that removes our impotence; it is His glory that removes our abasement; it is His richness that removes our poverty; and it is His forgiveness that removes our sins. From another angle, we can say that He dominates us through His dominion; He limits us through His limitlessness; He binds us through His boundlessness; He lowers us through His highness; He humbles us through His honor; He rules over us as He wills through His sovereignty; and He manipulates us as He wills through His possession. The reader should reflect on this.

What we just said is in line with how we behave intuitively, according to our *fiṭrah* (primal nature, innate disposition, initial makeup). For instance, when one wants riches from God, they do not say, "O Death-Giver! O Humiliator! Make me solvent!" Instead, they call God by relevant names like the Ever-Rich, the Ever-Mighty and the Powerful. Similarly, a sick person who wants to pray for their wellness would say, "O Healer! O Recoverer! O Ever-Kind! O Ever-Merciful! Show me mercy and heal me!" The person would not say, "Heal me, O Vengeful!" The same can be said and observed about the other divine attributes.

The Noble Qur'an also confirms our intuitive understanding and practice, and this is the best evidence for to the truth of the above theory of God's names. We see that the verses of the Qur'an end with names that

match the content of that verse. Whenever the Qur'an makes a statement, it justifies and backs it by mentioning one or two of God's name at the end, in accordance to the context. Among all revealed scriptures that we have, the Qur'an is the only book that uses the divine names to establish its claims. Thus it teaches us about the names of God.

We connect to God through His names, and to His names through their effects in our world. The signs of His beauty and majesty link us to His names of beauty and majesty, such as life, knowledge, power, might, magnificence and grandeur. And these names in turn link us to the holy divine essence, on which the entire world of existence depends.

The effects of God's names differ in terms of breadth and scope. In this sense, they correspond to their concepts, some of which are more inclusive than others. For instance, our qualities of hearing, sight, imagination and intellection are branches of our knowledge [which is their parent quality]. Then our knowledge, together with power, life and other qualities, is classified under God's sustenance, bestowment, blessing and benevolence. And these qualities, together with pardon, forgiveness and other qualities, fall under the universal mercy of God.

This shows that the divine names differ in terms of inclusion, restriction, universality and specificity, in accordance to their effects in our world. Some of these effects are more general, while others are more specific. Their degrees of generality and specificity stem from the realities that they indicate. Our concepts of these qualities would reveal how their underlying realities relate to one another in terms of breadth and inclusion. For example, divine knowledge is more specific compared to divine life, but it is more general compared to divine hearing, seeing, witnessing, subtlety and awareness. Similarly, "the Sustainer" is a more specific name compared to "the All-Merciful," but it is more general compared to "the Healer," "the Helper" and "the Guide." The same set of relations can be sketched among other names.

The excellent names of God have a wide spectrum that extends vertically. At the bottom of the spectrum, there is one or few names that are most specific and restricted, such that no other name can be classified under them. Then as we go up, the names become broader and more inclusive. Each name falls under another name that is more encompassing and universal, until they reach the highest name, which alone embraces the realities of all names. A diverse range of realities come under it together.

That is what is often called the Greatest Name (*al-ism al-aʿẓam*).

It should be clear that the more extensive a name is, the greater, more perfect and more powerful will be the effects and blessings that descend from it upon the world. This is based on the fact that the divine names are intermediaries for any effect or event in existence. That is why the universality and particularity of each name is matched by the universality and particularity of its effect. For the same reason, all effects go back to the Greatest Name, and all affairs are subject to it.

5. The Greatest Name of God (*al-Ism al-Aʿẓam*)

It is widely believed that the Greatest Name is a word, just like the other common names of God. It is also believed that if one calls God by this name, their wish will come true. The Greatest Name is believed to be a magical formula that does not fall short of bringing about anything. However, since people have not found this quality in any of the common names of God, including Allah, they have come to the conclusion that the Greatest Name must have a unique composition of letters that is unknown to us. Otherwise, if we were to discover it, everything would be subservient to our will.

The experts on miraculous prayers and spells believe that the Greatest Name is composed of letters, but not like regular words that are assigned conventionally. Rather, there is an intrinsic connection between the letters and the power of the name. Moreover, the letters and their composition differ according to one's need and wish. They have their special ways of extrapolating the letters first, and then combining them to make up the desired word in each case. One should refer to their discipline for these ways.[1]

There are some narrations which may seem to confirm the above view—that the Greatest Name is a word which is made up of letters. For instance, there are narrations that say:

(1) "In the name of God, the All-Merciful, the Ever-Merciful" (*bism Allāh al-Raḥmān al-Raḥīm*) is closer to the Greatest Name of God than the white part of the eye is to the black part.

(2) The Greatest Name is to be found in verse 2:255 (Āyat al-Kursī)

1 This view of the Greatest Name can be compared to the intricate formulations of crypto currencies. (Trans.)

and at the beginning of Chapter 3 (Āl-i ʿImrān).

(3) The letters of the Greatest Name are dispersed in Chapter 1 (al-Ḥamd). The Imams know them. Whenever they want, they can assemble them and call God by them, whereby their wish will be granted.

(4) Asaph son of Berachiah (Āṣaf b. Barkhiyā) could summon the throne of the Queen of Sheba in less than the blink of an eye because he prayed to God through some letters of His Greatest Name that he knew.

(5) The Greatest Name is composed of 73 letters. God has divided 72 of them among His prophets, and has preserved one letter for Himself in His hidden knowledge.

However, an adequate analysis of causality and its properties would make clear that the above notion cannot be correct [in its unrefined, apparent and literal sense]. The law of causality tells us the following principles:

(i) What has real impact in the universe is the *existence* of a thing [not the verbal utterance of a word that designates something conventionally].

(ii) Every cause has as much power as the degree of its existence.

(iii) There must be a real existential concordance between every effect and its cause.

Based on these principles, the Greatest Name cannot be merely a set of letters and sounds that are uttered, for letters and sounds are forms of qualities, which are a sub-category of accidents.[1] Nor can it be the *meaning* indicated by some letters, because a meaning is a mental image, and mental images cannot have a causal effect in the external world, inasmuch as they are mental entities. It is impossible that a sound which we create through our vocal cords—or a concept that we imagine in our minds—would be at such a high plane of existence that we can use it to influence and rule over everything as we wish. That sound or mental image is itself subject to our volition, and is created by us. So how could it be a causal agent in

1 In Islamic and Aristotelian metaphysics, an accident (*ʿaraḍī*) is something that does not stand on its own, but needs a substance (*jawhar*) to support it. Accidents are traditionally classified into ten categories, one of which is quality (*kayf*). What the author means here is that words and sounds are not substantial enough to effect any change in other things, for they cannot even support themselves. (Trans.)

the universe—to the extent that it can turn the earth and the sky upside down, and convert this world to the hereafter and vice versa?

We should remember that the only reality that acts as a cause in the world is God. So when we say the divine names—and especially the Greatest Name—effect changes in the universe and act as channels for God's effusions in our world, it means that they act through their *realities*. And the reality of each name is God Himself, viewed in the light of a specific attribute that corresponds to that name. Otherwise, it is neither the letters of these names, nor the meanings that we conceive from them in our minds, which act in the universe.

God has promised to respond to the prayer of anyone who calls Him: *I answer the supplicant's call when he calls Me* (2:186). As we said in our exposition of the verse,[1] this promise implies two conditions: (1) It must be a true prayer. (2) It must be requested from God alone. If one breaks off from all apparent means and instruments, and instead connects to their Lord for any wish that they may have, then they have indeed connected to the reality of the divine name which would be relevant in the case of their request. Thus that name will function through its existential reality and respond to the person's request. This is what is meant by "praying to God through His names." Now, the extent to which one's prayer is granted depends on the breadth of the name to which one connects. If one resorts to the Greatest Name, the person will enjoy an unconditional fulfillment of their prayer, because all things are subservient to the reality of the Greatest Name. This is how we should interpret the narrations and supplications in this regard, as opposed to the verbal or mental aspect of the names.

When it is said [in some narrations] that God taught some of His names—or His Greatest Name—to one of His prophets or servants, it means that He opened the way for that servant to totally cut off themselves from everything and turn wholeheartedly to God through calling Him with that name. This could be accompanied by some verbal utterance or mental concept, but that utterance or conception is meant as a shell to *preserve* those existential realities [of the person's total detachment, and/or the effects of the Greatest Name]. The letters and meanings are rather means and instruments in one way or another [not the reality of the Greatest Name]. The reader should reflect on this.

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1 See volume 3 (1st ed.), pp. 37-41 of the English translation. (Trans.)

6. The Number of the Excellent Names

The verses of the Qur'an do not confine the excellent names of God to any particular number. Instead, what we can infer from the verses is that any name in the world of existence which is the best of names in terms of meaning belongs to God. Hence, there is no limit for the number of God's excellent names. This is deduced from verses like: *Allah—there is no god except Him—to Him belong the most excellent names* (20:8); *To Allah belong the most excellent names, so supplicate Him by them* (7:180); *To Him belong the most excellent names. Whatever there is in the heavens glorifies Him and [whatever there is in] the earth* (59:24).

There are 120-odd divine names that appear in the Qur'an. They are:[1]

(1) *Al-Abqá* (the Most Lasting).
(2) *Al-ʿAfuww* (the Ever-Pardoning).
(3) *Al-Aḥad* (the Unique).
(4) *Aḥkam al-ḥākimīn* (the Firmest of rulers).
(5) *Ahl al-maghfirah* (the Worthy of forgiveness).
(6) *Ahl al-taqwá* (the Worthy of fear).
(7) *Aḥsan al-khāliqīn* (the Best Creator).
(8) *Al-Ākhir* (the Last).
(9) *Al-Akram* (the Most Gracious, the Noblest).
(10) *Al-Aʿlá* (the Most Sublime).
(11) *Al-Aʿlam* (the Most Knowledgeable).
(12) *ʿAllām al-ghuyūb* (the All-Knower of unseen things).
(13) *Al-ʿAlī* (the Ever-Sublime).
(14) *Al-ʿAlīm* (the Omniscient).
(15) *ʿĀlim al-ghayb wa al-shahādah* (the Knower of the unseen and the visible).[2]
(16) *Al-Aqrab* (the Nearest).
(17) *Arḥam al-rāḥimīn* (the Most Merciful of all merciful).
(18) *Al-Awwal* (the First).
(19) *Al-ʿAẓīm* (the Ever-Magnificent).

1 The author's list in the original text is according to the Arabic alphabet. In translation, the list is ordered based on their English transliterations, excluding the definite article *al-* at the beginning of most names. (Trans.)

2 The Qur'an also describes God as *ʿĀlim al-ghayb* (Knower of the unseen) without adding *al-shahādah* (the visible) in verse 34:3. (Trans.)

(20) *Al-ʿAzīz* (the Ever-Mighty).
(21) *Al-Badīʿ* (the Ever-Innovator).
(22) *Al-Bāriʾ* (the Producer).
(23) *Al-Barr* (the Righteous).
(24) *Al-Baṣīr* (the Ever-Seer).
(25) *Al-Bāṭin* (the Hidden).
(26) *Dhū al-ʿarsh* (the Possessor of the Throne).
(27) *Dhū al-faḍl al-aẓīm* (the Possessor of great bounty).
(28) *Dhū al-intiqām* (the Possessor of vengeance).
(29) *Dhū al-jalāl wa al-ikrām* (the Possessor of majesty and grace).
(30) *Dhū al-maʿārij* (the Possessor of the stairways).
(31) *Dhū al-quwwah* (the Possessor of power).
(32) *Dhū al-raḥmah* (the Possessor of mercy).
(33) *Dhū al-ṭawl* (the Possessor of opulence).
(34) *Fāliq al-ḥabb wa al-nawá* (the Splitter of the grain and the date-stone).
(35) *Fāliq al-iṣbāḥ* (the Splitter of mornings).
(36) *Al-Fāṭir* (the Originator).
(37) *Al-Fattāḥ* (the All-Arbiter).
(38) *Al-Ghaffār* (the All-Forgiver).
(39) *Ghāfir al-dhanb* (the Forgiver of sins).
(40) *Al-Ghafūr* (the Ever-Forgiver).
(41) *Al-Ghālib* (the Dominant, the Conqueror).
(42) *Al-Ghanī* (the Ever-Rich).
(43) *Al-Hādī* (the Guide).
(44) *Al-Ḥafī* (the Ever-Caring, the Ever-Gracious).
(45) *Al-Ḥafīẓ* (the Ever-Protector).
(46) *Al-Ḥakīm* (the Ever-Wise).
(47) *Al-Ḥalīm* (the Ever-Tolerant).
(48) *Al-Ḥamīd* (the Ever-Praiseworthy).
(49) *Al-Ḥaqq* (the Truth).
(50) *Al-Ḥasīb* (the Ever-Reckoner, the Ever-Sufficer).
(51) *Al-Ḥayy* (the Ever-Living).
(52) *Al-Ilāh* (the Deity).
(53) *Al-Jabbār* (the All-Dominating).
(54) *Al-Jāmiʿ* (the Gatherer).
(55) *Al-Kabīr* (the Ever-Great).

(56) *Al-Kāfī* (the Sufficer).
(57) *Al-Karīm* (the Ever-Gracious, the Ever-Noble).
(58) *Al-Khabīr* (the Ever-Aware).
(59) *Al-Khāliq* (the Creator).
(60) *Al-Khallāq* (the All-Creator).
(61) *Al-Khayr* (the Best, the Good).
(62) *Khayr al-fāṣilīn* (the Best Separator).
(63) *Khayr al-fātiḥīn* (the Best Arbiter).
(64) *Khayr al-ghāfirīn* (the Best Forgiver).
(65) *Khayr al-ḥākimīn* (the Best Judge).
(66) *Khayr al-mākirīn* (the Best Plotter).
(67) *Khayr al-munzilīn* (the Best Descender).
(68) *Khayr al-rāḥimīn* (the Best One to show mercy).
(69) *Khayr al-rāziqīn* (the Best Provider).
(70) *Khayr al-wārithīn* (the Best Inheritor).
(71) *Al-Laṭīf* (the Ever-Subtle).
(72) *Al-Majīd* (the Ever-Glorious).
(73) *Al-Malik* (the King).
(74) *Mālik al-mulk* (the Possessor of the kingdom).
(75) *Al-Matīn* (the Ever-Robust).
(76) *Al-Mawlá* (the Master).
(77) *Al-Mubdiʾ* (the Commencer).
(78) *Al-Mubīn* (the Manifest).
(79) *Al-Muhaymin* (the Guardian, the Pervading).
(80) *Al-Muḥīṭ* (the Encompassing).
(81) *Al-Muḥyī* (the Life-Giver).
(82) *Al-Mujīb* (the Answerer, the Responder).
(83) *Al-Muʾmin* (the Trusty, the Faithful).
(84) *Al-Muqīt* (the Guard, the Nourisher).
(85) *Al-Muqtadir* (the All-Powerful).
(86) *Al-Muṣawwir* (the Designer, the Shaper).
(87) *Al-Mustaʿān* (the Succorer, One Whose help is sought).
(88) *Al-Mutaʿāl* (the Supreme, the Exalted).
(89) *Al-Mutakabbir* (the Grandiose, the Superb).
(90) *Al-Naṣīr* (the Ever-Helper).
(91) *Al-Nūr* (the Light).
(92) *Qābil al-tawb* (the Acceptor of repentance).

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(93) *Al-Qadīr* (the Omnipotent).
(94) *Al-Qādir* (the Powerful).
(95) *Al-Qahhār* (the All-Dominant, the Overpowerer).
(96) *Al-Qāhir* (the Dominant).
(97) *Al-Qāʾim ʿalá kull nafs bi-mā kasabat* (He who stands over every soul for what it has earned).
(98) *Al-Qarīb* (the Ever-Near).
(99) *Al-Qawī* (the Strong).
(100) *Al-Qayyūm* (the All-Upright).
(101) *Al-Quddūs* (the All-Sacred).
(102) *Al-Rabb* (the Lord).
(103) *Rafiʿ al-darajāt* (the Uplifter of ranks).
(104) *Al-Raḥīm* (the Ever-Merciful).
(105) *Al-Raḥmān* (the All-Merciful).[1]
(106) *Al-Raqīb* (the Ever-Watchful).
(107) *Al-Raʾūf* (the Ever-Kind).
(108) *Al-Razzāq* (the All-Provider).
(109) *Al-Salām* (the Peaceful, the Peaceable).
(110) *Al-Ṣamad* (the Absolute, the Besought-of-all, the All-Perfect).
(111) *Al-Samīʿ* (the Ever-Hearing).

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1 It is common to use terms from different roots to translate *Raḥmān* and *Raḥīm* (usually a combination of Merciful, Compassionate and Beneficent). This, however, misses to convey the fact that both names are from the same root. The verbal pattern of *faʿlān* (as in *raḥmān*) often conveys exaggeration and inclusion, while the verbal patterns of *faʿīl* (as in *raḥīm*) and *faʿūl* (as in *raʿūf*) convey stability and duration. That is why in translating all divine names, I have used the prefix "All" for the former, and "Ever" for the latter. Another possible distinction is that *al-Raḥmān* denotes God's active mercy, where He takes the initiative before any action (or even existence) from the other side. *Al-Raḥīm*, however, denotes God's reactive or passive mercy, which operates in response to some act or request from a servant. This can be confirmed by the Qur'an's equivalence of *al-Raḥmān* with *Allāh*, and its common bundling of *al-Raḥīm* with *al-Ghafūr* (the Ever-Forgiver). At the same time, we should note that it is the Qur'an which takes precedence over linguistics, not vice versa. Therefore, we must admit the speculative nature of such distinctions. Overall, all these verbal patterns indicate some form of emphasis, and sometimes they are primarily used as expressions of eloquence through diversification. (Trans.)

(112) *Sarīʿ al-ḥisāb* (the Swift in reckoning).
(113) *Sarīʿ al-ʿiqāb* (the Swift in punishing).
(114) *Shadīd al-ʿiqāb* (the Mighty in punishment).
(115) *Shadīd al-miḥāl* (the Mighty in strategy).
(116) *Al-Shahīd* (the Ever-Witness).
(117) *Al-Shākir* (the Grateful).
(118) *Al-Shakūr* (the Ever-Grateful).
(119) *Al-Tawwāb* (the All-Relenter, the All-Returner).
(120) *Al-Wadūd* (the Ever-Lover).
(121) *Al-Wahhāb* (the All-Bestower).
(122) *Al-Wāḥid* (the One).
(123) *Al-Wakīl* (the Ever-Trustee, the Ever-Guardian).
(124) *Al-Wālī* (the Ally, the Patron).
(125) *Al-Walī* (the Ever-Guardian, the Ever-Friend).
(126) *Al-Wāsiʿ* (the Vast, the Expansive).
(127) *Al-Ẓāhir* (the Apparent).[1]

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1 (1) The author's list of Qur'anic names of God is not exhaustive. One should add the names *al-Faʿʿāl* (the All-Doer) and *Khayr al-nāṣirīn* (the Best Helper) to the list. Perhaps the name Allāh should also be included. (2) The author has not followed a consistent procedure in what to include. Some names—like *Ghāfir al-dhanb*, *Mālik al-mulk* and *Rafīʿ al-darajāt*—include an annexed part, while that part is omitted in other similar cases, as in *al-Badīʿ*, *al-Jāmiʿ* and *al-Rabb*. In the same light, the name *al-Mālik* (the Owner) should perhaps be listed independently (instead of *Mālik al-mulk*), as it is also found in verse 1:4. (3) The inclusion of the name *al-Wālī* is questionable. It is not asserted as a name of God in the Qur'an, but it is used in a negative sentence, to deny the existence or help of any ally or defender other than God (13:11). By the same standard, one would have to include other names such as: *al-Ḥakam* (the Judge, the Arbiter), *al-Kāshif* (the Remover), *al-Mukrim* (the Honorer), *al-Multaḥad* (the Refuge) and *al-Shafīʿ* (the Ever-Intercessor). (4) Some of the listed names, such as *al-Mubīn* and *al-Matīn*, are arguably used in the Qur'an as adjectives of other names, not as independent names of God. (5) There are several names that are used for God in the plural, either indicating majesty or including the angels who act as His agents and intermediaries. The plural form in these cases certainly includes God, so the names would be Qur'anic divine names. Some examples are: *al-Fāʿil* (the Doer), *al-Ḥāfiẓ* (the Protector), *al-Muʿadhdhib* (the Punisher), *al-Muhlik* (the Destroyer), *al-Mundhir* (the Warner), *al-Munshiʾ* (the Originator, the Grower), *al-Munzil*

As we said, the apparent meaning of these verses—*To Allah belong the most excellent names* (7:180) and *To Him belong the most excellent names* (59:24)—is that God is the sole real owner of these qualities. If they are found in others, it is a secondary possession, subordinate to God's primary possession. Other beings do not possess anything of these names except to the extent that God bestows upon them. Even then, He continues to possess the same qualities that are held by the other beings. Nothing exits God's absolute ownership despite His bestowal. For example, the reality of knowledge belongs to God alone. Others may have a share of it if He bestows it upon them, while it does not reduce His possession.[1]

It is in the *same sense* that some qualities are found in God and others.[2] This can be inferred from divine names in the comparative and superlative

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(the Descender), *al-Mursil* (the Sender), *al-Wārith* (the Inheritor) and *al-Zāriʿ* (the Planter, the Raiser). Perhaps one could also add the phrase: *al-qāʾim bil-qisṭ* (Standing with justice). (6) The name *al-Qāʾim ʿalá kull nafs bi-mā kasabat* is clearly out of place. Apparently the author included it because the word *qāʾim* is in the subject form, used in a nominal sentence, as opposed to using a verb in a verbal sentence. However, one would then have to include many other phrases as divine names by the same token. The same can be said about the name *al-Ghālib*. There are many other nouns that can be added to the list using this standard, such as: *al-Bāligh* (the Achiever), *al-Jāʿil* (the Maker, the Assigner), *al-Mughayyir* (the Modifier), *al-Munazzil* (the Descender), *al-Muṭahhir* (the Purifier), *al-Mutawaffī* (the Taker, the Seizer), *al-Mutimm* (the Perfecter) and *al-Rāfiʿ* (the Uplifter, the Exalter, the Exalted). All these points bring us back to what the author said at the beginning of the current discussion: that the divine names cannot be enumerated (18:109, 31:27, 74:31, 48:4, 48:7). Rather, any beautiful name and attribute belongs to the God. There are myriad manifestations of the divine, all of which are good and perfect. (Trans.)

1 This effectively reduces to the theory of *tajallī* (manifestation, expression, reflection). Anything that we observe in the world of existence is a reflection or extension of the Absolute, Who is the intrinsic Source of it. For an excellent discussion of this, and more insight on the current volume in general, see Hamid Parsania, Existence and the Fall, trans. S.A. Mirza (London: ICAS Press, 2006). (Trans.)

2 Some theologians believe that while God and other beings are described by the same qualities, these are simply homonyms; there is absolutely no common ground of meaning between them. The author refutes this view. (Trans.)

degrees—such as *al-Aʿlá* (the Most Sublime) and *al-Akram* (the Most Gracious)—because the apparent meaning of these adjectives is that the quality is found in both sides of the comparison. The same can be said about two-part comparative adjectives, such as *Khayr al-ḥākimīn* (the Best Judge), *Khayr al-rāziqīn* (the Best Provider) and *Aḥsan al-khāliqīn* (the Best Creator). They also apparently imply a common ground.

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7. Are the Divine Names Reserved?

Based on our above discussions, it should be clear that there is no evidence for the reservation of the names (*tawqifiyyat al-asmāʾ*).[1] Instead, we have evidence against it. Some have drawn on the current verse—*To Allah belong the most excellent names* (al-asmāʾ al-ḥusná)*, so supplicate Him by them, and abandon those who commit sacrilege in His names* (7:180)—to argue that the divine names are reserved [to what is found in the Qur'an and hadith]. This argument hinges on two conditions: (1) It assumes the article *al-* ("the" in *the most excellent names*) to be definite article, indicating what is already known and introduced (*ʿahd*). (2) It assumes that "committing sacrilege in the divine names" means going beyond what is strictly found in scriptural sources. Both of these conditions can be disputed, as we explained above.[2]

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They have also drawn on *mustafiḍah* (multiple, diffused, numerous) narrations which effectively say: "Indeed there are 99 names for God—one less than 100. Whoever enumerates them shall enter paradise." However, this does not prove the reservation and restriction of the divine names [to only what is transmitted through scriptural sources].

What we said here is from the exegetical (*tafsīrī*) point of view. There is also a jurisprudential aspect to this topic, which should be sought in Islamic law. We must also distinguish between formal appellation and general description. With respect to the former, caution in religion requires us to not *name* God with what is not found in the scriptural sources. With respect to the latter, permissible *descriptions* certainly go beyond that.

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1 This is a theological theory, saying that God's names are confined and reserved to what is found in the scripture; no other name applies to Him. (Trans.)

2 Instead, the article *al-* (the) indicates inclusion and universality, "committing sacrilege in the divine names" means applying the divine names to false gods, or applying inappropriate names to God. (Trans.)

Examining Narrations

(1) Imam ʿAlī said: The Almighty God has 99 names. Whoever calls God by them, He shall answer their call. And whoever enumerates them shall enter paradise.[1]

Author's comment: We shall soon present a similar narration to this from the Prophet, narrated by the Ahl al-Bayt. What is meant by "enumerating them" is the belief (*īmān*) that God is characterized by all realities and meanings denoted by these names, without leaving out any of them.

(2) The Messenger of God said: There are 99 names for God—one less than 100. Whoever enumerates them shall enter paradise. He is Odd and He likes the odd.[2]

(3) The Messenger of God said: God has 100 names minus one name. Whoever prays with them, God will answer their prayer.[3]

(4) The Messenger of God said: God says, "I have 99 names. Whoever enumerates them shall enter paradise."[4]

(5) The Messenger of God said: Indeed God has 99 names—one less than 100. Whoever enumerates them shall enter paradise.[5]

(6) The Messenger of God said: God has 99 names. Whoever enumerates them shall enter paradise. They are in the Qur'an.[6]

Author's comment: The last narration contravenes the narrations which list these names, because all of them include names that are not

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1 *Al-Tawḥīd*, via its chain of narration, from Imam al-Riḍā, from his fathers.

2 *Al-Durr al-manthūr*, on the authority of al-Bukhārī, Muslim, Aḥmad, al-Tirmidhī, al-Nasāʾī, Ibn Mājah, Ibn Khuzaymah, Abū ʿAwānah, Ibn Jarīr, Ibn Abī Ḥātim, Ibn Ḥabbān, al-Ṭabarānī, Abū ʿAbd-Allāh b. Mandah's *al-Tawḥīd*, Ibn Mardawayh, Abū Nuʿaym and al-Bayhaqī's *al-Asmāʾ wa al-ṣifāt*, on the authority of Abū Hurayrah.

3 *Al-Durr al-manthūr*, on the authority of Abū Nuʿaym and Ibn Mardawayh, on the authority of Abū Hurayrah.

4 *Al-Durr al-manthūr*, on the authority of al-Dārqaṭnī's *al-Gharāʾib*, on the authority of Abū Hurayrah.

5 *Al-Durr al-manthūr*, on the authority of Abū Nuʿaym and Ibn Mardawayh, on the authority of Ibn ʿAbbās and Ibn ʿUmar.

6 *Al-Durr al-manthūr*, on the authority of Abū Nuʿaym, on the authority of Ibn ʿAbbās and Ibn ʿUmar.

exactly found in the Qur'an. Unless what is meant is that their *meaning* is found in the Qur'an.

(7) Imam al-Ṣādiq narrated from his fathers, from Imam ʿAlī: The Messenger of God said, "Indeed God has 99 names—one less than 100. Whoever enumerates them shall enter paradise." They are:[1] (1) *Allāh*, (2) *al-Ilāh* (the Deity), (3) *al-Wāḥid* (the One), (4) *al-Aḥad* (the Unique), (5) *al-Ṣamad* (the Absolute, the Besought-of-all, the All-Perfect), (6) *al-Awwal* (the First), (7) *al-Ākhir* (the Last), (8) *al-Samīʿ* (the Ever-Hearing), (9) *al-Baṣīr* (the Ever-Seeing), (10) *al-Qadīr* (the Omnipotent), (11) *al-Qāhir* (the Dominant), (12) *al-ʿAlī* (the Ever-Sublime), (13) *al-Aʿlá* (the Most Sublime), (14) *al-Bāqī* (the Enduring), (15) *al-Badīʿ* (the Ever-Innovator), (16) *al-Bāriʾ* (the Producer), (17) *al-Akram* (the Most Gracious, the Noblest), (18) *al-Ẓāhir* (the Apparent), (19) *al-Bāṭin* (the Hidden), (20) *al-Ḥayy* (the Ever-Living), (21) *al-Ḥakīm* (the Ever-Wise), (22) *al-ʿAlīm* (the Omniscient), (23) *al-Ḥalīm* (the Ever-Tolerant), (24) *al-Ḥafīẓ* (the Ever-Protector), (25) *al-Ḥaqq* (the Truth), (26) *al-Ḥasīb* (the Ever-Reckoner, the Ever-Sufficer), (27) *al-Ḥamīd* (the Ever-Praiseworthy), (28) *al-Ḥafī* (the Ever-Caring), (29) *al-Rabb* (the Lord), (30) *al-Raḥmān* (the All-Merciful), (31) *al-Raḥīm* (the Ever-Merciful), (32) *al-Dhāriʾ* (the Creator), (33) *al-Rāziq* (the Provider), (34) *al-Raqīb* (the Ever-Watchful), (35) *al-Raʾūf* (the Ever-Kind), (36) *al-Rāʾī* (the Seer), (37) *al-Salām* (the Peaceful, the Peaceable), (38) *al-Muʾmin* (the Trusty, the Faithful), (39) *al-Muhaymin* (the Guardian, the Pervading), (40) *al-ʿAzīz* (the Ever-Mighty), (41) *al-Jabbār* (the All-Dominating), (42) *al-Mutakabbir* (the Grandiose, the Superb), (43) *al-Sayyid* (the Master), (44) *Subbūḥ* (the All-Glorified), (45) *al-Shahīd* (the Ever-Witness), (46) *al-Ṣādiq* (the Honest), (47) *al-Ṣāniʿ* (the Artisan, the Maker), (48) *al-Ẓāhir* (the Apparent),[2] (49) *al-ʿAdl* (the All-Just), (50) *al-ʿAfuww* (the Ever-Pardoning), (51) *al-Ghafūr* (the Ever-Forgiver), (52) *al-Ghanī* (the Ever-Rich), (53) *al-Ghiyāth* (the Rescuer), (54) *al-Fāṭir* (the Originator), (55) *al-Fard* (the Single), (56) *al-Fattāḥ* (the All-Arbiter), (57) *al-Fāliq*

1 Apparently the list is part of Imam ʿAlī's words. (Trans.)

2 This is the same as number 18. That is why the count goes up to 100. (Trans.)

(the Splitter), (58) *al-Qadīm* (the Ever-Ancient), (59) *al-Malik* (the King), (60) *al-Quddūs* (the All-Sacred), (61) *al-Qawī* (the Strong), (62) *al-Qarīb* (the Ever-Near), (63) *al-Qayyūm* (the All-Upright), (64) *al-Qābiḍ* (the Contracter), (65) *al-Bāsiṭ* (the Expander), (66) *Qāḍī al-ḥājāt* (the Fulfiller of needs), (67) *al-Majīd* (the Ever-Glorious), (68) *al-Mawlá* (the Master), (69) *al-Mannān* (the All-Favorer), (70) *al-Muḥīṭ* (the Encompassing), (71) *al-Mubīn* (the Manifest), (72) *al-Mughīth* (the Savior), (73) *al-Muṣawwir* (the Designer, the Shaper), (74) *al-Karīm* (the Ever-Gracious, the Ever-Noble), (75) *al-Kabīr* (the Ever-Great), (76) *al-Kāfī* (the Sufficer), (77) *Kāshif al-ḍurr* (the Remover of harm), (78) *al-Witr* (the Odd), (79) *al-Nūr* (the Light), (80) *al-Wahhāb* (the All-Bestower), (81) *al-Nāṣir* (the Helper), (82) *al-Wāsiᶜ* (the Vast, the Expansive), (83) *al-Wadūd* (the Ever-Lover), (84) *al-Hādī* (the Guide), (85) *al-Wafī* (the Ever-Faithful), (86) *al-Wakīl* (the Ever-Trustee, the Ever-Guardian), (87) *al-Wārith* (the Inheritor), (88) *al-Barr* (the Righteous), (89) *al-Bāᶜith* (the Resurrector), (90) *al-Tawwāb* (the All-Relenter, the All-Returner), (91) *al-Jalīl* (the Ever-Majestic), (92) *al-Jawād* (the Generous), (93) *al-Khabīr* (the Ever-Aware), (94) *al-Khāliq* (the Creator), (95) *Khayr al-nāṣirīn* (the Best Helper), (96) *al-Dayyān* (the Retributer), (97) *al-Shakūr* (the Ever-Grateful), (98) *al-ᶜAẓīm* (the Ever-Magnificent), (99) *al-Laṭīf* (the Ever-Subtle), (100) *al-Shāfī* (the Healer).[1]

(8) The Messenger of God said: Indeed there are 99 names for God—one less than 100. Whoever enumerates them shall enter paradise. Indeed He is Odd and He likes the odd. He is Allah, beside Whom there is no god,[2] (1) *al-Raḥmān*, (2) *al-Raḥīm*, (3) *al-Malik*, (4) *al-Quddūs*, (5) *al-Salām*, (6) *al-Muᵓmin*, (7) *al-Muhaymin*, (8) *al-ᶜAzīz*, (9) *al-Jabbār*, (10) *al-Mutakabbir*, (11) *al-Khāliq*, (12) *al-Bāriᵓ*, (13) *al-Muṣawwir*, (14) *al-Ghaffār*, (15) *al-Qahhār*, (16) *al-Wahhāb*, (17) *al-Rāziq*, (18) *al-Fattāḥ*, (19) *al-ᶜAlīm*, (20) *al-Qābiḍ*, (21) *al-Bāsiṭ*, (22) *al-Khāfiḍ* (the Abaser), (23) *al-Rāfiᶜ*, (24) *al-Muᶜizz* (the Giver of Honor), (25) *al-Mudhill* (the Giver

1 *Al-Tawḥīd*, via its chain of narration.

2 Translations are only given subsequently for names which have not been listed above. (Trans.)

of Dishonor), (26) *al-Samīʿ*, (27) *al-Baṣīr*, (28) *al-Ḥakam*, (29) *al-ʿAdl*, (30) *al-Laṭīf*, (31) *al-Khabīr*, (32) *al-Ḥalīm*, (33) *al-ʿAẓīm*, (34) *al-Ghafūr*, (35) *al-Shakūr*, (36) *al-ʿAlī*, (37) *al-Kabīr*, (38) *al-Ḥafīẓ*, (39) *al-Muqīt*, (40) *al-Ḥasīb*, (41) *al-Jalīl*, (42) *al-Karīm*, (43) *al-Raqīb*, (44) *al-Mujīb*, (45) *al-Wāsiʿ*, (46) *al-Ḥakīm*, (47) *al-Wadūd*, (48) *al-Majīd*, (49) *al-Bāʿith*, (50) *al-Shahīd*, (51) *al-Ḥaqq*, (52) *al-Wakīl*, (53) *al-Qawī*, (54) *al-Matīn*, (55) *al-Walī*, (56) *al-Ḥamīd*, (57) *al-Muḥṣī*, (58) *al-Mubdiʾ*, (59) *al-Muʿīd*, (60) *al-Muḥyī*, (61) *al-Mumīt*, (62) *al-Ḥayy*, (63) *al-Qayyūm*, (64) *al-Wājid* (the Possessor, the Finder), (65) *al-Mājid* (the Magnificent), (66) *al-Wāḥid*, (67) *al-Aḥad*, (68) *al-Ṣamad*, (69) *al-Qādir*, (70) *al-Muqtadir*, (71) *al-Muqaddim* (the Hastener), (72) *al-Muʾakhkhir* (the Delayer), (73) *al-Awwal*, (74) *al-Ākhir*, (75) *al-Ẓāhir*, (76) *al-Bāṭin*, (77) *al-Barr*, (78) *al-Tawwāb*, (79) *al-Muntaqim* (the Avenger), (80) *al-ʿAfuww*, (81) *al-Raʾūf*, (82) *al-Mālik al-mulk*, (83) *Dhū al-jalāl wa al-ikrām*, (84) *al-Wālī*, (85) *al-Mutaʿāl*, (86) *al-Muqsiṭ* (the Just), (87) *al-Jāmiʿ*, (88) *al-Ghanī*, (89) *al-Mughnī* (the Enricher), (90) *al-Māniʿ* (the Ever-Sublime, the Ever-Withholder), (91) *al-Ḍārr* (the Harmer, the Distressor), (92) *al-Nāfiʿ* (the Benefactor), (93) *al-Nūr*, (94) *al-Hādī*, (95) *al-Badīʿ*, (96) *al-Bāqī*, (97) *al-Wārith*, (98) *al-Rashīd* (the Ever-Guide, the Ever-Correct), (99) *al-Ṣabūr* (the Ever-Patient).[1]

(9) The Messenger of God said: Indeed God has 99 names. Whoever enumerates them shall enter paradise. I ask (1) *Allāh*, (2) *al-Raḥmān*, (3) *al-Raḥīm*, (4) *al-ilāh*, (5) *al-Rabb*, (6) *al-Malik*, (7) *al-Quddūs*, (8) *al-Salām*, (9) *al-Muʾmin*, (10) *al-Muhaymin*, (11) *al-ʿAzīz*, (12) *al-Jabbār*, (13) *al-Mutakabbir*, (14) *al-Khāliq*, (15) *al-Bāriʾ*, (16) *al-Muṣawwir*, (17) *al-Ḥakīm*, (18) *al-ʿAlīm*, (19) *al-Samīʿ*, (20) *al-Baṣīr*, (21) *al-Ḥayy*, (22) *al-Qayyūm*, (23) *al-Wāsiʿ*, (24) *al-Laṭīf*, (25) *al-Khabīr*, (26) *al-Ḥannān* (the All-Kind), (27) *al-Mannān*, (28) *al-Badīʿ*, (29) *al-Ghafūr*, (30) *al-Wadūd*, (31) *al-Shakūr*, (32) *al-Majīd*, (33) *al-Mubdiʾ*, (34) *al-Muʿīd*, (35) *al-Nūr*, (36) *al-Bādiʾ* (the Beginner) [version: *al-Qāʾim* (the Standing)], (37) *al-Awwal*, (38) *al-Ākhir*, (39) *al-Ẓāhir*, (40) *al-Bāṭin*, (41)

1 *Al-Durr al-manthūr*, on the authority of al-Tirmidhī, Ibn al-Mundhir, Ibn Ḥabbān, Ibn Mandah, al-Ṭabarānī, al-Ḥākim, Ibn Mardawayh and al-Bayhaqī, on the authority of Abū Hurayrah.

al-ʿAfuww, (42) *al-Ghaffār*, (43) *al-Wahhāb*, (44) *al-Fard* [version: *al-Qādir*], (45) *al-Aḥad*, (46) *al-Ṣamad*, (47) *al-Wakīl*, (48) *al-Kāfī*, (49) *al-Bāqī*, (50) *al-Mughīth*, (51) *al-Dāʾim* (the Everlasting), (52) *al-Mutaʿāl*, (53) *Dhā al-jalāl wa al-ikrām*, (54) *al-Mawlá*, (55) *al-Naṣīr*, (56) *al-Ḥaqq*, (57) *al-Mubīn*, (58) *al-Wārith*, (59) *al-Munīr* (the Ever-Illuminator, the Bringer of Light), (60) *al-Bāʿith*, (61) *al-Qadīr* [version: *al-Mujīb*], (62) *al-Muḥyī*, (63) *al-Mumīt*, (64) *al-Ḥamīd* [version: *al-Jamīl* (the Ever-Beautiful)], (65) *al-Ṣādiq*, (66) *al-Ḥafīẓ*, (67) *al-Muḥīṭ*, (68) *al-Kabīr*, (69) *al-Qarīb*, (70) *al-Raqīb*, (71) *al-Fattāḥ*, (72) *al-Tawwāb*, (73) *al-Qadīm*, (74) *al-Witr*, (75) *al-Fāṭir*, (76) *al-Razzāq*, (77) *al-ʿAllām*, (78) *al-ʿAlī*, (79) *al-ʿAẓīm*, (80) *al-Ghanī*, (81) *al-Malīk*, (82) *al-Muqtadir*, (83) *al-Akram*, (84) *al-Raʾūf*, (85) *al-Mudabbir*, (86) *al-Mālik*, (87) *al-Qāhir*, (88) *al-Hādī*, (89) *al-Shākir*, (90) *al-Karīm*, (91) *al-Rafīʿ*, (92) *al-Shahīd*, (93) *al-Wāḥid*, (94) *Dhā al-ṭawl*, (95) *Dhā al-Maʿārij*, (96) *Dhā al-Faḍl*, (97) *al-Khallāq*, (98) *al-Kafīl*, (99) *al-Jalīl*.

Author's comment: The name *Allāh* is not part of the list. It is rather mentioned in these narrations as the subject to be predicated by the other names.

(10) Muḥammad b. Jaʿfar says: I once asked my father, [Imam] Jaʿfar b. Muḥammad al-Ṣādiq, about the 99 divine names, which whoever enumerates them shall enter paradise. He said: "They are mentioned in the Qur'an. There are five names in Sūrah al-Fātiḥah (Chapter 1): (1) *Yā Allāh*,[1] (2) *Yā Rabb*, (3) *Yā Raḥmān*, (4) *Yā Raḥīm*, (5) *Yā Mālik*.

There are 33 names in Sūrah al-Baqarah (Chapter 2): (6) *Yā Muḥīṭ*, (7) *Yā Qadīr*, (8) *Yā ʿAlīm*, (9) *Yā Ḥakīm*, (10) *Yā ʿAlī*, (11) *Yā ʿAẓīm*, (12) *Yā Tawwāb*, (13) *Yā Baṣīr*, (14) *Yā Walī*, (15) *Yā Wāsiʿ*, (16) *Yā Kāfī*, (17) *Yā Raʾūf*, (18) *Yā Badīʿ*, (19) *Yā Shākir*, (20) *Yā Wāḥid*, (21) *Yā Samīʿ*, (22) *Yā Qābiḍ*, (23) *Yā Bāsiṭ*, (24) *Yā Ḥayy*, (25) *Yā Qayyūm*, (26) *Yā Ghanī*, (27) *Yā Ḥamīd*, (28) *Yā Ghafūr*, (29) *Yā Ḥalīm*, (30) *Yā Ilāh*, (31) *Yā Qarīb*, (32) *Yā Mujīb*, (33) *Yā ʿAzīz*, (34) *Yā Naṣīr*, (35) *Yā Qawī*, (36) *Yā Shadīd*, (37) *Yā Sarīʿ*, (38)

1 *Yā* (O, Oh) is a vocative term that is used when calling or praying to someone. *Yā Allāh* means "O God!" (Trans.)

Yā Khabīr.
In Sūrah Āl-i ʿImrān (Chapter 3): (39) *Yā Wahhāb*, (40) *Yā Qāʾim*, (41) *Yā Ṣādiq*, (42) *Yā Bāʿith*, (43) *Yā Munʿim*, (44) *Yā Mutafaḍḍil*.
In Sūrah al-Nisāʾ (Chapter 4): (45) *Yā Raqīb*, (46) *Yā Ḥasīb*, (47) *Yā Shahīd*, (48) *Yā Muqīt*, (49) *Yā Wakīl*, (50) *Yā ʿAlī*, (51) *Yā Kabīr*.
In Sūrah al-Anʿām (Chapter 6): (52) *Yā Fāṭir*, (53) *Yā Qāhir*, (54) *Yā Laṭīf*, (55) *Yā Burhān*.
In Sūrah al-Aʿrāf (Chapter 7): (56) *Yā Muḥyī*, (57) *Yā Mumīt*.
In Sūrah al-Anfāl (Chapter 8): (58) *Yā Niʿm al-Mawlá*, (59) *Yā Niʿm al-Naṣīr*.
In Sūrah Hūd (Chapter 11): (60) *Yā Ḥafīẓ*, (61) *Yā Majīd*, (62) *Yā Wadūd*, (63) *Yā Faʿʿālan li-mā yurīdu*.
In Sūrah al-Raʿd (Chapter 13): (64) *Yā Kabīr*, (65) *Yā Mutaʿāl*.
In Sūrah Ibrāhīm (Chapter 14): (66) *Yā Mannān*, (67) *Yā Wārith*.
In Sūrah al-Ḥijr (Chapter 15): (68) *Yā Khallāq*.
In Sūrah Maryam (Chapter 19): (69) *Yā Fard*.
In Sūrah Ṭā-Hā (Chapter 20): (70) *Yā Ghaffār*.
In Sūrah *qad aflaḥa* (Chapter 23): (71) *Yā Karīm*.
In Sūrah al-Nūr (Chapter 24): (72) *Yā Ḥaqq*, (73) *Yā Mubīn*.
In Sūrah al-Furqān (Chapter 25): (74) *Yā Hādī*.
In Sūrah Sabaʾ (Chapter 34): (75) *Yā Fattāḥ*.
In Sūrah al-Zumar (Chapter 39): (76) *Yā ʿĀlim*.
In Sūrah Ghāfir (Chapter 40): (77) *Yā Ghāfir*, (78) *Yā Qābil al-tawb*, (79) *Yā Dhā al-ṭawl*, (80) *Yā Rafīʿ*.
In Sūrah al-Dhāriyāt (Chapter 51): (81) *Yā Razzāq*, (82) *Yā Dhā al-quwwah*, (83) *Yā Matīn*.
In Sūrah al-Ṭūr (Chapter 52): (84) *Yā Barr*.
In Sūrah *iqtarabat* (Chapter 54): (85) *Yā Malīk*, (86) *Yā Muqtadir*.
In Sūrah al-Raḥmān (Chapter 55): (87) *Yā Dhā al-jalāl wa al-ikrām*, (88) *Yā Rabb al-mashriqayn*, (89) *Yā Rabb al-maghribayn*, (90) *Yā Bāqī*, (91) *Yā Muḥsin*.
In Sūrah al-Ḥadīd (Chapter 57): (92) *Yā Awwal*, (93) *Yā Ākhir*, (94) *Yā Ẓāhir*, (95) *Yā Bāṭin*.
In Sūrah al-Ḥashr (Chapter 59): (96) *Yā Malik*, (97) *Yā Quddūs*, (98) *Yā Salām*, (99) *Yā Muʾmin*, (100) *Yā Muhaymin*, (101) *Yā ʿAzīz*, (102) *Yā Jabbār*, (103) *Yā Mutakabbir*, (104) *Yā Khāliq*, (105)

Yā Bāriʾ, (106) *Yā Muṣawwir*.
In Sūrah al-Burūj (Chapter 85): (107) *Yā Mubdiʾ*, (108) *Yā Muʿīd*.
In Sūrah al-Fajr (Chapter 89): (109) *Yā Watr*.
In Sūrah al-Ikhlāṣ (Chapter 112): (110) *Yā Aḥad*, (111) *Yā Ṣamad*."[1]

Author's comment: There are several problems in this narration: (i) It includes the name *Allāh* as one of the 99, while it is not one of them. (ii) Some names are repeated, such as *al-Kabīr*. (iii) It says 99 at the beginning, but adds up to 110 [excluding *Allāh*]. (iv) It has listed *al-Burhān* as a divine name that appears in Sūrah al-Anʿām, and *al-Fard* as a divine name that appears in Sūrah Maryam. There are further issues that one can raise regarding this narration.[2]

The above [numbers 7-10] were some narrations that we found, which enumerate the divine names. Given the difference between them, it becomes clear that none of these narrations is meant to *restrict* the divine names to the given list. Moreover, some of them include names that are not found in the Qur'an in the nominal form, while there are some names in the Qur'an which are missing from them. All these narrations say is that there are 99 divine names which have these special features: (i) Whoever prays with them, their prayer will be answered. (ii) Whoever enumerates them shall enter paradise.

There are other narrations which suggest that God has more than 99 names, as we shall see presently. Furthermore, there are many other divine names which are found neither in the Qur'an nor in the narrations that enumerate the divine names, but are found in some supplications narrated from the Prophet and the Imams.

(11) Imam al-Ṣādiq said: God has created a name that is not pronounced through letters, that is not uttered by words, that is not embodied in a person, that is not described by any analogy, and that is not colored by any color. Sides and locations do not apply to it; definitions are far from it; and the senses of all thinkers are

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1 *Al-Durr al-manthūr*, on the authority of Abū Nuʿaym.

2 For instance, many of the names are not found in the chapter, but are derived and deduced from descriptions of God in the chapter, such as al-Mubdiʾ and al-Muʿīd in Sūrah al-Burūj. Meanwhile, such inference can support the claim that the divine names are not restricted to what is found in the scripture verbatim. (Trans.)

veiled from it. It is covered without having a covering. Then He made it a complete word based on four concomitant parts that none precedes the others. He manifested three of them due to His creatures' need of them, and He veiled one of them which is the name that is concealed and reserved. So these are the names that have appeared. The manifest names are *Allāh*, *Tabāraka* (He is Blessed) and *Taʿālá* (He is Exalted). God has subordinated four pillars for each of these names, making twelve pillars [in total].[1] Then He created thirty names for each pillar, as actions that are attributable to that [pillar]. He is (1) *al-Raḥmān*, (2) *al-Raḥīm*, (3) *al-Malik*, (4) *al-Quddūs*, (5) *al-Khāliq*, (6) *al-Bāriʾ*, (7) *al-Muṣawwir*, (8) *al-Ḥayy*, (9) *al-Qayyūm*, (10) *Lā taʾkhudhuhu sinah wa lā nawm* (no nap or sleep overtakes Him), (11) *al-ʿAlīm*, (12) *al-Khabīr*, (13) *al-Samīʿ*, (14) *al-Ḥakīm*, (15) *al-ʿAzīz*, (16) *al-Jabbār*, (17) *al-Mutakabbir*, (18) *al-ʿAlī*, (19) *al-ʿAẓīm*, (20) *al-Muqtadir*, (21) *al-Qādir*, (22) *al-Salām*, (23) *al-Muʾmin*, (24) *al-Muhaymin*, (25) *al-Bāriʾ*, (26) *al-Munshiʾ*, (27) *al-Badīʿ*, (28) *al-Rafīʿ*, (29) *al-Jalīl*, (30) *al-Karīm*, (31) *al-Rāziq*, (32) *al-Muḥyī*, (33) *al-Mumīt*, (34) *al-Bāʿith*, (35) *al-Wārith*.[2]

These names, and the rest of the most excellent names up to 360 names, are related to those three names. The three names are the pillars, while He has veiled the one [fourth] name—that is concealed and reserved—with them.[3] This is [the meaning of] His words: *Say: Invoke "Allah" or invoke "the All-Merciful." That which*

1 *Al-Tawḥīd*'s version says: "He veiled one of them which is the name that is concealed and reserved by those three names that have appeared. The manifest names are *Allāh*, *Tabāraka* and *Subḥāna* (He is Glorified), each of which has four pillars, making twelve pillars [in total]."

2 The author has quoted *al-Tawḥīd*'s version under verse 17:110. That version also mentions the name *al-Baṣīr* after *al-Samīʿ*. There the author notes: "These are 36 names out of the total of 360. Note that the name *al-Bāriʾ* (the Maker) is mentioned twice, which is perhaps a mistake on the part of the scribes. The second one might have been *al-Bādiʾ* (the Beginner)." See vol. 25, p. 313 of the English translation. (Trans.)

3 *Al-Tawḥīd*'s version says: "The three names are the pillars and a veil for the one name that is concealed and reserved by them."

you may invoke, to Him belong the most excellent names (17:110)[1].[2]

Author's comment: Let us discuss this hadith part by part:

"God has created a name that is not pronounced through letters…" The descriptions given at the beginning of this hadith explicitly show that what is meant by "name" here is not a word, nor the mental concept indicated by the word. It should be clear that neither a word, nor the mental concept corresponding to it, has the features described in this hadith. Similarly, the next part of the hadith is not compatible with the common notion of a "name" [as a word or a mental concept]. Even if there is some word involved, what is meant by "name" here can only be an external entity that is designated by the word. In particular, when we take into account its three-fold elements of *Allāh*, *Tabāraka* and *Taʿālá*, we realize that this sense of the "name" cannot be anything but the divine essence—or something that subsists by the divine essence, and is certainly not external to it.

"God has created a name." Given the above explanation, what is meant here is not what is commonly understood by "creation." Rather, it means a certain appearance or manifestation of the divine essence, such that a particular name emerges from it. This confirms what we said previously: that there is a hierarchy within the divine names. Some of them are causes with respect to others; they act as a channel for the appearance and existence of their subordinate names. The chain extends all the way up, to a name whose particular determination is a total lack of determination. The qualification of the divine essence by that name is tantamount to an absolute unconditionality.

"The manifest names are *Allāh*, *Tabāraka* and *Taʿālá*." Here the hadith is describing general aspects which are a point of reference for all particular aspects of perfection. Every need and lack in the world of creation is fulfilled by these three aspects of the divine: (1) *Allāh*: this name indicates the divine essence in its most inclusive sense, as a collection of all perfections. (2) *Tabāraka*: this name indicates an affirmative aspect of the divine. It affirms every quality of perfection for it, and presents it as a source of every good and blessing. (3) *Taʿālá*: this name indicates a negational aspect of the divine. It negates all deficiency from it, and presents

1 The verse's translation here is slightly modified in accordance with the author's interpretation below. (Trans.)

2 *Al-Kāfī*, via its chain of narration.

it as the remover of every need.

"As actions that are attributable to that [pillar]." The demonstrative pronoun "that" here refers to the [three manifest] names. This is effectively what we said above: there is a causal hierarchy between the names, such that one emanates from another. The explicit mention of number 360 in this hadith proves that the divine names are not limited to 99.

"The three names are the pillars, while He has veiled the one [fourth] name." The one which is "concealed and reserved" is still a "name," which means that it is an expression and determination of the transcendent essence of God. At the same time, it is concealed and unmanifest by the virtue of its very nature and reality. This means that its expression lies in being unexpressed; its determination is lack of determination.[1] This is what is meant by the idea that God is not delimited by any definition, including this very negational definition. He does not fall into any description or attribute, including this very negational description. The reason is that these expressions are descriptions from us, while the divine essence is greater and higher than all our descriptions.

This means that the name *Allāh*—which embraces all divine qualities of perfections—is a reality that is inferior to the divine *essence*. It is also inferior to the concealed and reserved name of God. The same goes with *Tabāraka* and *Taʿālá*. These three names together veil and guard the concealed name, without any of them being higher than others. Then the four of them—the three names, as well as the concealed name—are inferior to the divine essence. The divine essence, however, cannot be indicated by any expression or hint. That is because any phrase or sign that one may devise would serve as a "name," which means that it is delimited [by the particular definition and determination of that name], while the divine essence is greater than and superior to any definition.

The hadith then refers to the verse: *Say: Invoke "Allah" or invoke "the All-Merciful" (al-Raḥmān) That* (ayyan) *which you invoke, to Him belong* (lahu) *the most excellent names* (17:110). The relevance of this verse to the hadith is that the pronoun in *lahu* (Him or It) refers to the word *ayyan* (that), and *ayyan* is a conditional noun (*ism al-sharṭ*) which indicates an indeterminate meaning. Its determinate meaning is lack of determination. It should also be evident that what is meant in this verse by *Allāh* and

1 In other words, it is not particularized, qualified or molded in any way whatsoever. (Trans.)

al-Rāḥmān is not the actual words, but the reality indicated by them. That is why the verse does not say, "Invoke *with* [the name] Allah (*udᶜū bi-Allāh*)" but it says, "Invoke Allah [directly] (*udᶜū Allāh*)." Hence, the verse is saying that all divine names are ascribed to, and supported by, a certain station of which there cannot be any report or indication except the lack of report and indication. The reader should reflect on this.[1]

Some of the divine names in this hadith—such as *Tabāraka* (He is Blessed), *Taᶜālá* (He is Exalted) and *Lā taʾkhudhuhu sinah wa lā nawm* (no nap or sleep overtakes Him)—are rather verbs and phrases, not nouns proper. They are "names" not in the linguistic sense, but in the sense that they denote God's essence from the angle of a particular quality.

This is among the key narrations in this regard. Its content is much loftier than what is found in common discussions and understood by ordinary minds. For the same reason, we did not comment on it beyond some basic intimations. A full exposition of it would be beyond the scope of the current work. Nevertheless, we already presented the principles needed to decode the hadith under number 4 of our discussion on the excellent names of God, titled "The Relation of the Divine Names and Attributes to Us and to Themselves." The reader should contemplate that discussion so that the matter may become clear to them as it should. And God is the support.

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1 In defining the primary meaning of a verse, what comes first is Qur'anic evidence, in the light of historical context and conventional understanding (*ᶜurf*). Narrations and linguistics come next. In terms of Qur'anic evidence, verse 17:110 should be understood in the light of verses 25:60, 21:36 and 13:30. They belong to the same series. All these verses address a common misconception at the time of the revelation of the Qur'an, especially with respect to the divine name *al-Raḥmān*. They clarify that there is no distinction or duality between *Allāh* and *al-Raḥmān*. Given these verses, and given what is conventionally understood by the general audience, the verse is saying: "You may call God by either the name *Allāh* or the name *al-Raḥmān*. Either of them that you call is valid, because to Him belong the most excellent names." The author's interpretation of the verse could refer to a secondary layer of meaning, which he has deduced in the light of the above hadith. His linguistic points—about *ayyan* and the lack of the letter *bāʾ* before *Allāh* and *al-Raḥmān*—also serve to match the verse with the hadith. Otherwise, the verse can be closely matched with the current verse of discussion: *To Allah belong the most excellent names, so supplicate Him by them* (7:180). (Trans.)

(12) Imam al-Bāqir said: The Greatest Name of God comprises of 73 letters. Asaph son of Berachiah (Āṣaf b. Barkhiyā) had only one letter of that. He cut through the land between him and the Queen of Sheba's throne, brought the throne with his hand, and then the earth reverted to its original condition. He did all that in less than the blink of an eye through uttering that one letter. We [Ahl al-Bayt] have 72 letters. And one letter is reserved with God in His knowledge of the unseen. There is no movement and no power save by God, the Supreme, the Magnificent.[1]

(13) Imam al-Ṣādiq said: God made His Greatest Name composed of 73 letters. He gave twenty-five letters of it to Adam, fifteen letters to Noah, eight letters to Abraham, four letters to Moses, and two letters to Jesus—with which He used to bring the dead to life, and cure the blind and the leper. He gave 72 letters to Muḥammad, and concealed one letter. Thus no one may know what He holds within, but He knows what His servants hold within.[2]

Author's comment: There are other narrations in line with the last two. The idea that the Greatest Name can be broken into 73 letters, or that it is composed of these letters, should not lead one to imagine that it is literally composed of alphabetical letters. We already clarified this. Both narrations talk about the letters of a single name being divided among the prophets, except for one letter. If the Greatest Name were really a word composed of alphabetical letters, then it would indicate a meaning with all its components, and dividing it among the prophets would certainly not benefit any of them [since the meaning is conveyed only by all letters together].

(14) Imam ʿAlī said in a sermon: My Lord is Subtle in subtlety,[3] yet He cannot be described with subtlety. He is Magnificent in magnificence, yet He cannot be described with magnificence. He is Great in greatness, yet He cannot be described with greatness. He is Immense in immensity, yet He cannot be described with thickness. He is before everything, so one cannot talk about something

1 *Baṣāʾir al-darajāt*, via its chain of narration.

2 *Baṣāʾir al-darajāt*, via its chain of narration.

3 This can also be translated as: "His subtlety is subtle" or "He is the subtlety's subtlety." The same would apply to the subsequent passages. Overall, what is meant is to emphasize that God is the absolute and infinite source of any perfection. (Trans.)

"before" Him. He is after everything, so one cannot talk about something "after" Him. He willed all things not through [mental] deliberation. He achieves [what He seeks] not through deception. He is within all things, but He is neither mixed with them, nor separate from them. He is Apparent, but not in the sense of direct contact. He is Manifest, but not to be seen through observation. He is Distinct, but not through distance. He is Near, but not in the sense of mutual proximity. He is Subtle, but not as a physical body. He is Existent, but not after being non-existent. He is a Maker, but without being forced. He wills, but not through deliberation. He hears, but not through any instrument. He sees, but not through any tool.[1]

Author's comment: In this hadith, as one can see, the Imam affirms the root meaning of the names and attributes for God, but negates their particular properties that arise due to contingence (*imkān*) and material deficiency. This confirms what we said in our exposition of the verse [7:180]. The same idea is found in very many narrations from the Imams, especially in sermons by Imams ʿAlī, al-Ḥasan, al-Ḥusayn, al-Bāqir, al-Ṣādiq, al-Kāẓim and al-Riḍā. Interested readers should refer to the compendiums of hadith. And God is the Guide.

(15) Imam al-Ṣādiq said: He has no like, counterpart or equivalent. To Him belong the most excellent names, which cannot be applied to anyone else, and which He has described in His Book: *so supplicate Him by them, and abandon those who commit sacrilege in His names* (7:180); [they commit sacrilege in His name] out of ignorance, not knowledge. One who commits sacrilege in His names without knowledge, commits polytheism unknowingly, and disbelieves while they think they are doing good. That is why He says: *And most of them do not believe in Allah without ascribing partners to Him* (12:106). They are *those who commit sacrilege in His names* (7:180) not out of knowledge, by placing His names where they do not belong[2].[3]

Author's comment: This hadith confirms our discussion on what

1 *Al-Tawḥīd*, via its chain of narration.

2 That is, by ascribing His names to other beings. (Trans.)

3 *Al-Tawḥīd*, via its chain of narration, on the authority of Ḥanān b. Sadīr, as a part of a longer hadith.

makes the divine names "most excellent" and what it means to commit sacrilege in them. What "cannot be applied to anyone else" is the meaning of the names after being divested of their material and deficient aspects, which makes them applicable to God. For instance, the name "the Creator" (*al-Khāliq*) cannot be applied to anyone else in its real sense that is applicable to God. The same can be said about the other divine names.

(16) Concerning *To Allah belong the most excellent names, so supplicate Him by them* (7:180) Imam al-Ṣādiq said: By God, we [Ahl al-Bayt] are the most excellent names [of God]. He does not accept any act [of worship and goodness] from His servants unless they acknowledge us [as divine leaders].[1]

Author's comment: In this narration, "name" is meant as something that designates something else, whether it is a word or not. The prophets and their successors are divine names in a few ways: (i) They guide to God. (ii) They are intermediaries between God and His creation. (iii) They are at such level of servitude that they do not have anything other than God. Hence, they manifest the divine names and attributes. This should also clarify the next two narrations.

(17) Once Imam al-Ṣādiq was asked about the verse: *Among those We have created are a nation who guide by the truth and do justice thereby* (7:181). He said: They are the Imams.[2]

(18) Concerning the same verse Imam al-Bāqir said: That is us [Ahl al-Bayt].[3]

(19) Concerning *Among those We have created are a nation who guide by the truth and do justice thereby* (7:181) the Messenger of God said: There is a group among my nation (*ummah*) who persist with the truth until Jesus son of Mary descends—whenever he descends.[4]

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1 *Al-Kāfī*, via its chain of narration, on the authority of Muʿāwiyah b. ʿAmmār. It is also narrated in *Tafsīr al-ʿAyyāshī*.

2 *Al-Kāfī*, via its chain of narration, on the authority of ʿAbd-Allāh b. Sinān. This is also narrated from Imam al-Bāqir in *Tafsīr al-ʿAyyāshī*, on the authority of Ḥumrān.

3 *Tafsīr al-ʿAyyāshī*, on the authority of Muḥammad b. ʿAjlān.

4 *Al-Durr al-manthūr*, on the authority of Ibn Abī Ḥātim, on the authority of al-Rabīʿ.

(20) Imam ʿAlī said: This nation [of Muslims] will divide into 73 sects. 72 of them will be in hell, and one will be in paradise. Those [in paradise] are the ones whom God has described: *Among those We have created are a nation who guide by the truth and do justice thereby* (7:181). They are me and my followers (*shīʿah*).[1]

Author's comment: Al-ʿAyyāshī has also narrated the same hadith, except that the last sentence is: "They are on the right path."[2] We already presented two similar hadiths to this from the Imam under the verse: *Among the people of Moses is a nation who guide [the people] by the truth and do justice thereby* (7:159). One of them [hadith 14] was from *Tafsīr al-ʿAyyāshī*, on the authority of Abū al-Ṣahbāʾ; and the other [hadith 15] was from *al-Durr al-manthūr* through various chains.

(21) Imam al-Ṣādiq said: When a servant sins, if God wants good for that servant, He sends a punishment for them and makes them remember to ask forgiveness. When a servant sins, if God wants evil for that servant, He sends a bounty to make them persist with that [sin] and forget to ask forgiveness. That is what He says: *We will draw them imperceptibly [into ruin], whence they do not know* (7:182): [He draws them] through bestowing bounties upon them when they sin.[3]

(22) Once Imam al-Ṣādiq was asked about the verse: *We will draw them imperceptibly [into ruin], whence they do not know* (7:182). He said: That is when a servant sins, but their bounties are renewed for them, such that they make the person forget to ask forgiveness for that sin.[4]

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1 *Tafsīr al-burhān*, on the authority of Muwaffaq b. Aḥmad, on the authority of al-Sarī, on the authority of Ibn al-Mundhir, on the authority of al-Ḥusayn b. Saʿīd, on the authority of his father, on the authority of Abān b. Taghlib, on the authority of Faḍl, on the authority of ʿAbd al-Malik al-Hamdānī, on the authority of Zādhān.

2 I could not find this in *Tafsīr al-ʿAyyāshī*, nor in any other books of *tafsīr* or hadith. (Trans.)

3 *Al-Kāfī*, via its chain of narration, on the authority of Sufyān b. al-Simṭ.

4 *Al-Kāfī*, via its chain of narration, on the authority of Samāʿat b. Mihrān. Another similar hadith is also narrated in *al-Kāfī*, via its chain of narration, on the authority of Ibn Riʾāb, on the authority of some of his companions.

(23) Al-Ḥasan b. al-Ṣayqal says: Once I asked Imam al-Ṣādiq about what some people have narrated: "One hour[1] of contemplation is better than one [entire] night of standing [in prayer]." I asked, "What kind of contemplation?" He explained, "It is to stop when you pass by a ruined place or house, and say: Where are your residents? Where are your builders? How come you don't speak?"[2]

Author's comment: This narration offers a clear *example* of contemplation [but meritorious and constructive contemplation is not *limited* to this].

(24) Imam al-Riḍā said: Worship is not to pray or fast a lot. Indeed worship is but to contemplate upon the affairs[3] of God, Mighty and Majestic He is.[4]

(25) Imam ʿAlī said: Contemplation leads one to goodness and acting upon it.[5]

(26) Imam al-Ṣādiq said: The best worship is to continually contemplate on God and His power.[6]

(27) Concerning *and He leaves them bewildered in their rebellion* (7:186) *Tafsīr al-Qummī* says: He leaves the person to themself.

Author's comment: What is meant by God leaving *them bewildered in their rebellion* (7:186) is that He will not assist them against their egos. He leaves them alone in this regard by cutting off His aid. This is effectively the same as "leaving the person to themself" [as interpreted by al-Qummī].

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1 The word *sāʿah* (hour, time, moment) indicates a short indeterminate amount of time. It is not necessarily 60 minutes. (Trans.)

2 *Al-Kāfī*, via its chain of narration.

3 What is meant by "affairs" here is the acts of God and what pertains to Him. Also, the exclusive expression of the hadith could be interpreted as either emphasis, or referring to the core and foundation of God's *ʿibādah* (worship, servitude, service). It is noteworthy that several verses of the Qur'an mention both *ʿibādah* and prayer (or prostration), implying a distinction between the two (20:14, 98:5, 7:206, 9:112, 22:77, 53:62). If we add these verses to verse 3:191, we can deduce the above hadith. (Trans.)

4 *Al-Kāfī*, via its chain of narration, on the authority of Muʿammar b. Khallād.

5 *Al-Kāfī*, via its chain of narration, on the authority of Ribʿī.

6 *Al-Kāfī*, via its chain of narration, on the authority of Muḥammad b. Abī al-Naṣr, on the authority of some of his men.

Verses 187-188

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يَسْئَلُونَكَ عَنِ السَّاعَةِ أَيَّانَ مُرْساها قُلْ إِنَّما عِلْمُها عِنْدَ رَبِّي لا يُجَلِّيها لِوَقْتِها
إِلاَّ هُوَ ثَقُلَتْ فِي السَّماواتِ وَ الْأَرْضِ لا تَأْتِيكُمْ إِلاَّ بَغْتَةً يَسْئَلُونَكَ كَأَنَّكَ
حَفِيٌّ عَنْها قُلْ إِنَّما عِلْمُها عِنْدَ اللَّهِ وَ لكِنَّ أَكْثَرَ النَّاسِ لا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿١٨٧﴾ قُلْ
لا أَمْلِكُ لِنَفْسِي نَفْعاً وَ لا ضَرًّا إِلاَّ ما شاءَ اللَّهُ وَ لَوْ كُنْتُ أَعْلَمُ الْغَيْبَ
لاسْتَكْثَرْتُ مِنَ الْخَيْرِ وَ ما مَسَّنِيَ السُّوءُ إِنْ أَنَا إِلاَّ نَذِيرٌ وَ بَشِيرٌ لِقَوْمٍ يُؤْمِنُونَ﴿١٨٨﴾

(7:187) *They question you concerning the Hour, when will it berth? Say, "Its knowledge is only with my Lord: none except Him shall manifest it at its time. It is heavy in the heavens and the earth. It will not overtake you but suddenly." They ask you as if you were well-informed of it. Say, "Its knowledge is only with Allah, but most people do not know."*

(7:188) *Say, "I have no control over any benefit for myself nor [over] any harm except what Allah may will. Had I known the Unseen, I would have acquired much good, and no ill would have befallen me. I am only a warner and a bearer of good news to a people who have faith."*

Introduction

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These two verses clarify that knowledge of the Hour [that is, the Resurrection, the hereafter] is among unseen matters that are reserved for God. No one other than God knows about it. There is no evidence to help one determine its time or speculate its occurrence whatsoever. That is why it will only occur abruptly. Some of the descriptions in these verses also give us some hints about the reality of the Hour.

Commentary

يَسْئَلُونَكَ عَنِ السَّاعَةِ أَيَّانَ مُرْساها قُلْ إِنَّما عِلْمُها عِنْدَ رَبِّي لا يُجَلِّيها لِوَقْتِها
إِلاَّ هُوَ ثَقُلَتْ فِي السَّماواتِ وَ الْأَرْضِ لا تَأْتِيكُمْ إِلاَّ بَغْتَةً يَسْئَلُونَكَ كَأَنَّكَ
حَفِيٌّ عَنْها قُلْ إِنَّما عِلْمُها عِنْدَ اللَّهِ وَ لكِنَّ أَكْثَرَ النَّاسِ لا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿١٨٧﴾

(7:187) ***They question you concerning the Hour* (al-Sāʿah)*, when will it berth* (mursāhā)*? Say, "Its knowledge is only with my Lord: none except Him shall manifest it* (yujallīhā, from tajliyah) *at its time. It is heavy in the heavens and the earth. It will not overtake you but suddenly." They ask you as if you were well-informed of it. Say, "Its knowledge is only with Allah, but most people do not know."***

Al-sāʿah (the hour, the time, the moment) refers to the time of the people's resurrection and return to God for His universal judgment of all affairs. The article *al-* (the) is a definite article, indicating that the term is already known by the audience. Nonetheless, the word *al-sāʿah* is rather used as a proper noun in the Qur'an and hadith [even when there is no prior discussion or introduction of it].

Mursá can serve three functions: (1) a locative noun (*ism makān*); (2) a temporal noun (*ism zamān*); (3) a verbal noun or gerund (*maṣdar*).[1] When one fixes and establishes something, one says: *arsaytu al-shayʾ*. What is meant here is: "When shall the Hour occur and be established?" *Tajliyah* means "to unveil, to manifest." When someone uncovers something, it is said: *jallāhu*. When something appears, it is said: *injalá*.

… none except Him shall manifest it at its time…: Upon its time of occurrence, it is only God Who shall disclose and uncover it. Since the "knowledge of the Hour" and "its manifestation" are used interchangeably, it shows that the occurrence or existence of the Hour is the same as the knowledge of it. The Hour is a reality which is preserved in the unseen treasury of God. He will reveal and disclose it whenever He wills. It is not

1 As a locative noun, it would mean "the place of establishment and occurrence." As a temporal noun, it would mean "the time of establishment and occurrence." As a verbal noun, it would mean "establishment and occurrence." Given the word *ayyāna* (when) in the verse, the last meaning is intended here, as the author suggests presently. (Trans.)

encompassed or known by any other being. That is impossible because its occurrence and manifestation is accompanied by the annihilation of all things other than God. No being can behold the annihilation of itself. One's own disappearance cannot appear to any being. Besides, our knowledge is based on the forces and causes that govern this world. However, this entire system will end and transform with the occurrence of the Hour.

… It is heavy in the heavens and the earth…: Exegetes differ on the sense in which the Hour is heavy. Here are some suggested interpretations:

The *knowledge* of the Hour is a heavy weight on the back of the heavens and the earth.

The *features* of the Hour weigh heavy on the inhabitants of the heavens and the earth, because of its intensity, punishments, reckoning and retribution.

The *occurrence* of the Hour is heavy, since the heaven will be rolled up, the stars will be scattered, the sun and the moon will be gathered together, and the mountains will start moving.

The *graveness and intensity* of the Hour is so strong that the heavens and the earth cannot bear it.

Given what we said above, the "heaviness of its knowledge" is the same as the "heaviness of its external existence and occurrence." In other words, the Hour is heavy in all its aspects, including its occurrence, its knowledge and its features. The heavens and the earth cannot bear its manifestation because it necessitates their annihilation, and nothing can endure its own annihilation. Therefore, the exegetes' difference of opinion is rather out of place. God knows best.

… It will not overtake you but suddenly…: Our explanation above should clarify the meaning here. Something is said to appear suddenly and abruptly when it was now known prior to its appearance. This is the case of the Hour due to its heaviness: none of its parts or features is known before its complete appearance. That is why its appearance to all beings will be abrupt and unanticipated. This should also clarify what is meant by the next part of the verse: *They ask you as if you were well-informed of it*. We shall discuss this presently.

… They ask you as if you were well-informed* (ḥafī) *of it…: According to al-Rāghib, *ḥafī* means "knowledgeable." Apparently it is a cognate of *ḥafītu*, which is used when one insists in asking for something. The phrase *of it* is in fact the complement of *They ask you*, but the two are separated

with the interjection of *as if you were well-informed*. The effective meaning is: "They ask you of it as if you were well-informed about it."[1] The sentence suggests that the audience used to repeat this question and insist on it. That is why the question and answer are somewhat repeated in the verse with different expressions.[2]

This second question shows, either directly or indirectly, that the polytheists thought the Prophet's initial answer—*Its knowledge is only with my Lord*—to be only a polite gesture. This means that while he did not know about the time of the Resurrection, he did not admit it, but deferred its knowledge to his Lord, out of religious courtesy. That is why he used the word "Lord" to refer to God, which implies his status as a servant who must only follow his duties. Similarly, his next sentence—*none except Him shall manifest it at its time*—only refers to the immensity of this occurrence, but does not address the knowledge of its time. For all these reasons, the audience repeated their question so that he may either respond to it directly, or otherwise acknowledge his ignorance. Hence God orders him to say:

… Its knowledge is only with Allah…: This clarifies that what is said here is a final and earnest answer. This statement is made out of *knowledge*, not out of *ignorance*. If one realizes that the Hour is something that is only known to God, this is a sign of one's knowledge of it, not one's ignorance about it. Nor is it merely a deferral of the matter to one's Lord out of one's duty as a servant. This is why here the answer refers to God as *Allah* instead of *my Lord* [in the first answer].

… but most people do not know: This refers to the ignorance of most people. It is equivalent to an earlier part of the verse: *Its knowledge is only with my Lord*. Since the audience were accustomed to sense perception, they used to assume that whatever they hear is of the nature of sensory information and follows the same rules. As a result, they thought that they have the capacity to know what is described for them and comprehend

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1 The interjection serves to remove the need for a second complement, because of it indicates the complement for both they ask you and well-informed. This is an eloquent concision. (Trans.)

2 The root meaning of *ḥafī* is "to push to the end." Thus it is used for one who has many requests, one who knows much, and one who is very kind. God is *al-Ḥafī* (19:47) in the sense that He always cares for and looks after His servants. (Trans.)

it within their knowledge. If they did not know something, it must have been due to some concealment and secrecy; otherwise, they would know it like they know other sensory matters if it were to be revealed to them. The verse shows that this impression is incorrect. They cannot compare all forms of knowledge to sensory information. There are some unseen realities—such as the Hour—which cannot be known by anyone save God. The verse also shows that the knowledge of the Hour is something that no one can bear except God. The same is true about the reality of its features: all aspects of the Hour are heavy.[1]

قُلْ لا أَمْلِكُ لِنَفْسِي نَفْعاً وَ لا ضَرًّا إِلاَّ ما شاءَ اللَّهُ وَ لَوْ كُنْتُ أَعْلَمُ الْغَيْبَ لاسْتَكْثَرْتُ مِنَ الْخَيْرِ وَ ما مَسَّنِيَ السُّوءُ إِنْ أَنَا إِلاَّ نَذِيرٌ وَ بَشِيرٌ لِقَوْمٍ يُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿١٨٨﴾

(7:188) ***Say, "I have no control over any benefit for myself nor [over] any harm except what Allah may will. Had I known the Unseen, I would have acquired much good, and no ill would have befallen me. I am only a warner and a bearer of good news to a people who have faith."***

The polytheists' question in the last verse implied that one who claims to be a prophet is effectively claiming to know the unseen. But that is not true, because only God has genuine and independent knowledge of the unseen. Others can know only through God's revelation and teaching. In this verse, God orders His Prophet to dissociate himself from the claim of knowing the unseen.

The real reason for why God is the only being with knowledge of the unseen is that all other beings—without exception—are limited in their existence. Their being is defined by some boundaries. A corollary of this is that they do not have access to what lies beyond their existential

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1 The Qur'an refers to the Resurrection as the "meeting" (*liqā'*) of God in numerous verses. God does not exist in time. The absolute is not a temporal reality. Therefore, meeting the divine cannot occur in time either: *It will not overtake you but suddenly* (7:187). A crucial point to always remind ourselves is that as long as we are bound by the shackles of time, we cannot have a proper understanding of God and the hereafter. The experience and realization of timelessness is a necessary condition to decoding the profundity of religious teachings. (Trans.)

boundaries. God is the only being that is unlimited, infinite and encompassing of all things. Hence, He is the only One Who knows the unseen.[1]

Explaining this real reason would be somewhat advanced for the simple minds of the Prophet's audience at the time. That is why God commands His Prophet to talk to them in terms that they would be able to comprehend. The verse's explanation can be elaborated as follows: (1) The knowledge of the unseen would guide one to every benefit and harm. (2) If one were to know what is beneficial and what is harmful to them, they would naturally use that knowledge in their advantage. (3) Therefore, if one does not maximize their benefit and minimize their harm, it is a sign that they do not know the unseen.

Say, "I have no control…": This part of the verse gives a description of the Prophet which contradicts his knowledge of the unseen.

… Had I known the Unseen…: This part of the verse clarifies the consequence of knowing the unseen. The two parts together negate knowledge of the unseen from the Prophet.

… I am only a warner…: The last part of the verse clarifies the Prophet's real function and position. His sole claim is that he is a messenger, nothing else.

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Examining Narrations

(1) Concerning the verse, *They question you concerning the Hour, when will it berth?* (7:187) *Tafsīr al-Qummī* says: People of the tribe Quraysh sent al-ʿĀṣ b. Wāʾil al-Sahmī, al-Naḍr b. al-Ḥārith b. Kaladah, Uqbat b. Abī Muʿayṭ to the Jewish scholars in Najrān [in Yemen] to teach them some questions that they may ask the Messenger of God. Among those questions was: "When will the Hour set in?" In response, God revealed: *They question you concerning the Hour, when will it berth?…* (7:187).

(2) Concerning *al-sūʾ* (ill, evil, misfortune) in *Had I known the Unseen, I would have acquired much good, and no ill* (al-sūʾ) *would have befallen me* (7:188) Imam al-Ṣādiq said: It means *faqr* (poverty, need, lack).[2]

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1 In other words, there is no "unseen" for Him to begin with, while the term is applicable to other beings. (Trans.)

2 *Tafsīr al-ʿAyyāshī*, on the authority of Khalaf b. Ḥammād, on the authority of

Verses 189-198

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هُوَ الَّذِی خَلَقَكُمْ مِنْ نَفْسٍ واحِدَةٍ وَ جَعَلَ مِنْها زَوْجَها لِيَسْكُنَ إِلَيْها فَلَمَّا تَغَشَّاها حَمَلَتْ حَمْلاً خَفِيفاً فَمَرَّتْ بِهِ فَلَمَّا أَثْقَلَتْ دَعَوَا اللَّهَ رَبَّهُما لَئِنْ آتَيْتَنا صالِحاً لَنَكُونَنَّ مِنَ الشَّاكِرِينَ ﴿١٨٩﴾ فَلَمَّا آتاهُما صالِحاً جَعَلا لَهُ شُرَكاءَ فِيما آتاهُما فَتَعالَى اللَّهُ عَمَّا يُشْرِكُونَ ﴿١٩٠﴾ أَ يُشْرِكُونَ ما لا يَخْلُقُ شَيْئاً وَ هُمْ يُخْلَقُونَ ﴿١٩١﴾ وَ لا يَسْتَطِيعُونَ لَهُمْ نَصْراً وَ لا أَنْفُسَهُمْ يَنْصُرُونَ ﴿١٩٢﴾ وَ إِنْ تَدْعُوهُمْ إِلَى الْهُدى لا يَتَّبِعُوكُمْ سَواءٌ عَلَيْكُمْ أَ دَعَوْتُمُوهُمْ أَمْ أَنْتُمْ صامِتُونَ ﴿١٩٣﴾ إِنَّ الَّذِينَ تَدْعُونَ مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ عِبادٌ أَمْثالُكُمْ فَادْعُوهُمْ فَلْيَسْتَجِيبُوا لَكُمْ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ صادِقِينَ ﴿١٩٤﴾ أَ لَهُمْ أَرْجُلٌ يَمْشُونَ بِها أَمْ لَهُمْ أَيْدٍ يَبْطِشُونَ بِها أَمْ لَهُمْ أَعْيُنٌ يُبْصِرُونَ بِها أَمْ لَهُمْ آذانٌ يَسْمَعُونَ بِها قُلِ ادْعُوا شُرَكاءَكُمْ ثُمَّ كِيدُونِ فَلا تُنْظِرُونِ ﴿١٩٥﴾ إِنَّ وَلِيِّيَ اللَّهُ الَّذِی نَزَّلَ الْكِتابَ وَ هُوَ يَتَوَلَّى الصَّالِحِينَ ﴿١٩٦﴾ وَ الَّذِينَ تَدْعُونَ مِنْ دُونِهِ لا يَسْتَطِيعُونَ نَصْرَكُمْ وَ لا أَنْفُسَهُمْ يَنْصُرُونَ ﴿١٩٧﴾ وَ إِنْ تَدْعُوهُمْ إِلَى الْهُدى لا يَسْمَعُوا وَ تَراهُمْ يَنْظُرُونَ إِلَيْكَ وَ هُمْ لا يُبْصِرُونَ ﴿١٩٨﴾

(7:189) *It is He who created you from a single soul, and made from it its mate, that he might find comfort with her. So when he covered her, she bore a light burden and passed [some time] with it. When she had grown heavy, they both invoked Allah, their Lord: "If You give us a healthy [child], we will be surely grateful."*

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a man. This is also narrated from Imam al-Ṣādiq in *Maʿānī al-akhbār*, on the authority of Khalaf b. Ḥammād, on the authority of a man. It is also narrated from Imam al-Bāqir in *Ṭibb al-Aʾimmah*, on the authority of Jābir b. Yazīd.

(7:190) *Then when He gave them a healthy [child], they ascribed partners to Him in what He had given them. Exalted is Allah above [having] any partners that they ascribe [to Him]!*
(7:191) *Do they ascribe [to Him] partners that create nothing and have been created themselves,*
(7:192) *and can neither help them, nor help themselves?*
(7:193) *And if you call them to guidance, they will not follow you: it is the same to you whether you call them or whether you are silent.*
(7:194) *Indeed those whom you invoke besides Allah are servants like you. So invoke them: they should answer you, if you are truthful.*
(7:195) *Do they have any feet to walk with? Do they have any hands to grasp with? Do they have any eyes to see with? Do they have any ears to hear with? Say, "Invoke your partners [that you ascribe to Allah] then contrive against me and spare me not.*
(7:196) *My guardian is indeed Allah Who sent down the Book, and He takes care of the righteous.*
(7:197) *Those whom you invoke besides Him can neither help you, nor help themselves."*
(7:198) *If you call them to guidance, they will not hear. You see them observing you, but they do not perceive.*

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Introduction

These verses follow the main theme that pervades the chapter: the covenants of humankind [with their Lord], and the breaking of these covenants in most cases.

Commentary

هُوَ الَّذِی خَلَقَكُمْ مِنْ نَفْسٍ واحِدَةٍ وَ جَعَلَ مِنْها زَوْجَها لِيَسْكُنَ إِلَيْها فَلَمَّا تَغَشَّاها حَمَلَتْ حَمْلاً خَفِيفاً فَمَرَّتْ بِهِ فَلَمَّا أَثْقَلَتْ دَعَوَا اللَّهَ رَبَّهُما لَئِنْ آتَيْتَنا صالِحاً لَنَكُونَنَّ مِنَ الشَّاكِرِينَ ﴿١٨٩﴾ فَلَمَّا آتاهُما صالِحاً جَعَلا لَهُ شُرَكاءَ فِيما آتاهُما فَتَعالَى اللَّهُ عَمَّا يُشْرِكُونَ ﴿١٩٠﴾

(7:189-190) ***It is He who created you from a single soul, and made from it its mate, that he might find comfort with her. So when he covered***

her* (taghashshāhā)*, she bore a light burden and passed [some time] with it. When she had grown heavy, they both invoked Allah, their Lord: "If You give us a healthy [child], we will be surely grateful." Then when He gave them a healthy [child], they ascribed partners to Him in what He had given them. Exalted is Allah above [having] any partners that they ascribe [to Him]!

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These two verses provide an analogy for the Children of Adam in general. They are meant to illustrate the people's breaching of a covenant that they have taken on themselves, and their injustice against the signs and communications of God.

The meaning is: *It is He who created you*: all Children of Adam. *From a single soul*: the father of each of you. *And made from it*: from the same species; *its mate, that he*: the man who is the "single soul"; *might find comfort with her*: with the woman who is his spouse. *So when he covered her, she bore a light burden*: that is the zygote, which is light. *And passed [some time] with it*: the mother carried it for a while as she came in, went out, sat down and stood up; until the initial seed grew in her womb and turned into a heavy fetus that made her heavy. *When she had grown heavy, they both invoked Allah, their Lord*: making a covenant and promise with Him. *"If You give us a healthy [child], we will be surely grateful"*: we will proclaim Your blessing; will ascribe it to You alone, not to any other cause or means; and will not resort to anything other than You.

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The word *taghashshī* alludes to sexual intercourse. The verse literally says "a righteous child" (*ṣāliḥan*). However, what is meant here is not religious righteousness, but righteous in terms of being fit to live and grow to be a complete person, without any physical deficiency or deformity. That is what the parents wish for their child upon its birth and the beginning of its growth. This is a form of God's *rizq* (provision, sustenance).

***Then when He gave them a healthy [child]…*:** God granted their request and made them pleased by giving them a healthy child that is fit to live to maturity.

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***… they ascribed partners to Him in what He had given them…*:** They fell into polytheism with respect to their healthy child. Their love and care for the child led them to cling to every possible means and submit to every other force besides God. Thus they broke the covenant and promise that they had taken upon themselves: to thank God and not be ungrateful toward His blessing and Lordship.

This is the story of the majority of humans, except those upon whom God blesses with His special mercy. Most people are very quick to break their covenant, contravene their promise, and not fulfill their vows. However: *Exalted is Allah above [having] any partners that they ascribe [to Him]!*

As one can see in our interpretation above, this story is a generic depiction of all parents among humankind. It describes how humans in general feel and behave when they are about to have a child. After all, every human being is born of their parents, and this is how the human population has grown, as the Qur'an says: *O humankind! We created you from a male and a female, and made you nations and tribes* (49:13). Since parents have a strong sense of care and love for their baby, they would naturally turn to God wholeheartedly with respect to their baby's development and birth. They may not do so consciously or with any ritual detail, but that is the state of their heart as they feel desperate and cut off from all means. This can be compared to the condition of one who is faced with turbulence in the sea, when the billows toss their ship about in every direction.

In short, parents cut off from every other source, and turn to God sincerely in the matter of their child. They pledge to God that if You bless us with a healthy child that we like, we will ever be grateful to You. But when He grants their wish and gives them a healthy child, they associate partners with God by clinging to every possible instrument in order to protect and raise their child, and by resorting to every possible shield.

***… Exalted is Allah above [having] any partners that they ascribe* (ʿammā yushrikūna):** The verb *yushrikūna* (they ascribe) is in the plural form, not the dual form. This confirms our above interpretation [that the two verses are about all people in general]. If the *single soul* and *its mate* at the beginning of verse 7:189 were pointing to a specific couple—like Adam and Eve—then the ending should have been in the dual form, like *ʿan shirkihimā* or *ʿammā ashrakā* (their association, in the dual form).

Another reason why this cannot be a description of Adam is that the subsequent verses refute *shirk* (polytheism, association) and criticize the polytheists, where the apparent meaning of *shirk* is serving a god other than God. Such an act is far from Adam, who was the chosen friend of God (*ṣafī Allāh*). Even if we disregard his prophethood—or do not accept the infallibility of the prophets—we still cannot ascribe error and *shirk* to Adam, because the Qur'an explicitly says that God chose and guided

him. It also says explicitly that one whom is guided by God shall never go astray: *Then his Lord chose him, and turned to him clemently, and guided him* (20:122); *Whomever Allah guides is rightly guided* (17:97); *Who is more astray than him who invokes besides Allah such as would not respond to him until the Day of Resurrection* (46:5). But what error and straying is greater than serving other-than-God?

Here are a few other interpretations for this verse, suggested by some exegetes, with our comments about them:

(1) Perhaps what is meant by *shirk* here is not blatant polytheism, but a subtle shift of one's attention to the apparent means and instruments as a source of reliance besides God. That would only be failing to maintain the highest degree of *khulūṣ* (purity, sincerity), which is implied by: *we will be surely grateful* (7:189). As discussed at the beginning of this chapter—under the verse: *and You will not find most of them to be grateful* (7:17)—the grateful (*al-shākirūn*) in the Qur'an's nomenclature are the same as the chosen servants of God (*al-mukhlaṣūn*).[1] They are those who have risen above the plane of Satan's temptations, since there is no way for heedlessness to creep in their hearts. Therefore, the criticism implicit here—*Exalted is Allah above [having] any partners that they ascribe [to Him]* (7:190)—describes Adam and Eve's fall from their complete dedication to God as they got engaged with planning how to raise their child and procure the apparent means for that.

Comment: There still remain two problems with this interpretation: (i) The subsequent part of the verse is in the plural [not dual]: *Exalted is Allah above [having] any partners that they ascribe [to Him]* (7:190). (ii) The apparent meaning of *shirk* in the subsequent verses is serving other gods [not merely a distraction of the heart to the natural means and forces].

(2) Some exegetes have tried to explain away these two problems by referring to the verse: *It is He who carries you across land and sea. When you are in the ships, and they sail with them with a favorable wind…* (10:22). This verse starts with a universal address directed to all people, then it shifts to a particular address directed specifically to those who embark on a ship. In the current verses of discussion, we have an opposite transition: the verses start specifically about Adam and Eve, then they are generalized to all humans. Only the first part of the first verse is about Adam and

1 See volume 15 (1st ed.), pp. 42-43 of the English translation. (Trans.)

Eve:[1] *It is He who created you from a single soul, and made from it its mate* (7:189). Then the verse moves on to talk about the polytheists among all humans, who ask God for a healthy child, and then associate partners with Him in that. This transition serves to show that every couple among the Children of Adam make such a covenant with God—through their inner state [not a verbal expression]—but then break their covenant.[2]

Comment: In the above mentioned verse—*It is He who carries you* (10:22)—there is some decisive evidence which clarifies the meaning and removes all ambiguity. However, there is no such unequivocal evidence for the claimed transition from a particular statement to a universal one in the current verses. This is against the eloquence of the Qur'an. Unless one says that the evidence for this transition is the last statement in these two verses—*Exalted is Allah above [having] any partners that they ascribe [to Him]* (7:190)—and the next few verses. Either way, this possibility is a mix of our interpretation and the first suggested interpretation by other exegetes. It follows their interpretation with respect to the first sentence in the two verses, and follows our interpretation for the rest.

(3) Some exegetes have suggested that there is some omission (*ḥadhf*) and connection (*īṣāl*) in the part: *Then when He gave them a healthy [child], they ascribed partners to Him* (7:190). The implied meaning is: "Then when God gave Adam and Eve healthy children, their healthy children ascribed partners to Him." The dual pronoun "they" in *they ascribed partners* is not the subject of this sentence. Instead, the pronoun represents an omitted possessive pronoun, their children, which is the real subject of the sentence.

Comment: There is no evidence to support this possibility.

(4) Some exegetes have accepted the objection, and have admitted that Adam and his wife ascribed partners to God. They have relied on certain narrations that they have reported regarding this story.

Comment: These narrations are either fully fabricated or partially distorted. We cannot rely on such accounts because they contravene the

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1 Thus, only the first part would necessitate a dual form of verbs and pronouns. (Trans.)

2 This is rather a clever and subtle inference from the use of both dual and plural pronouns in the two verses. It is only one step away from the author's preferred interpretation above, which is more consistent and fluent across the entire two verses. (Trans.)

Qur'an.

أَ يُشْرِكُونَ ما لا يَخْلُقُ شَيْئاً وَ هُمْ يُخْلَقُونَ ﴿١٩١﴾ وَ لا يَسْتَطِيعُونَ لَهُمْ نَصْراً وَ لا أَنْفُسَهُمْ يَنْصُرُونَ ﴿١٩٢﴾ وَ إِنْ تَدْعُوهُمْ إِلَى الْهُدى لا يَتَّبِعُوكُمْ سَواءٌ عَلَيْكُمْ أَ دَعَوْتُمُوهُمْ أَمْ أَنْتُمْ صامِتُونَ ﴿١٩٣﴾

(7:191-193) ***Do they ascribe [to Him] partners that create nothing and have been created themselves, and can neither help them, nor help themselves? And if you call them to guidance, they will not follow you: it is the same to you whether you call them or whether you are silent.***

The first verse can be about either physical idols, or any means or force beside God, because relying on any source other than God would also be a form of *shirk* (polytheism, association). Nevertheless, the next two verses [7:192-193] are apparently about physical idols specifically: they are objects that cannot help their worshipers, cannot help themselves, and do not recognize whether one prays to them or not.

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ تَدْعُونَ مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ عِبادٌ أَمْثالُكُمْ فَادْعُوهُمْ فَلْيَسْتَجِيبُوا لَكُمْ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ صادِقِينَ ﴿١٩٤﴾ أَ لَهُمْ أَرْجُلٌ يَمْشُونَ بِها أَمْ لَهُمْ أَيْدٍ يَبْطِشُونَ بِها أَمْ لَهُمْ أَعْيُنٌ يُبْصِرُونَ بِها أَمْ لَهُمْ آذانٌ يَسْمَعُونَ بِها قُلِ ادْعُوا شُرَكاءَكُمْ ثُمَّ كِيدُونِ فَلا تُنْظِرُونِ ﴿١٩٥﴾

(7:194-195) ***Indeed those whom you invoke besides Allah are servants like you. So invoke them: they should answer you, if you are truthful. Do they have any feet to walk with? Do they have any hands to grasp with? Do they have any eyes to see with? Do they have any ears to hear with? Say, "Invoke your partners [that you ascribe to Allah] then contrive against me and spare me not."***

These two verses explain and justify the last three verses.

Indeed those whom you invoke besides Allah are servants like you…: The reason why We said that your gods are themselves created and are incapable of anything, is that they are *servants like you*; just as you are created and subject to God's direction, so are they.

… So invoke them: they should answer you, if you are truthful: This is

one of the Qur'an's arguments against the polytheists. Since they pray to their gods, it implies that they believe their gods to have knowledge and power. That is why the Qur'an ascribes such a claim to them and refutes it.

Do they have any feet to walk with? Do they have any hands to grasp with? Do they have any eyes to see with? Do they have any ears to hear with? …: How could they answer you when their legs do not walk, their hands do not grasp, their eyes do not see, and their ears do not hear? These are only the forms and shapes of these organs which you have carved and painted on them. Otherwise, they are only inanimate objects. These verses use the word *ʿibād* (servants) for physical objects.

… Say, "Invoke your partners [that you ascribe to Allah] then contrive against me and spare me not": From here to the end of the verses [7:198] is a continuation of the Prophet's argument against the polytheists. The Prophet is ordered to challenge them to recruit their gods against him. This order is meant to distinguish the Prophet's path from theirs. The inability of their gods will clarify that the Lord of Muḥammad is the only God, to Whom belongs all knowledge and all power. Their gods, on the other hand, have no knowledge to find their way to anything, nor any power to support their worshipers.

إِنَّ وَلِيِّيَ اللَّهُ الَّذِي نَزَّلَ الْكِتابَ وَ هُوَ يَتَوَلَّى الصَّالِحِينَ ﴿١٩٦﴾ وَ الَّذِينَ تَدْعُونَ مِنْ دُونِهِ لا يَسْتَطِيعُونَ نَصْرَكُمْ وَ لا أَنْفُسَهُمْ يَنْصُرُونَ ﴿١٩٧﴾ وَ إِنْ تَدْعُوهُمْ إِلَى الْهُدى لا يَسْمَعُوا وَ تَراهُمْ يَنْظُرُونَ إِلَيْكَ وَ هُمْ لا يُبْصِرُونَ ﴿١٩٨﴾

(7:196-198) ***My guardian is indeed Allah Who sent down the Book, and He takes care of the righteous. Those whom you invoke besides Him can neither help you, nor help themselves." If you call them to guidance, they will not hear. You see them observing you, but they do not perceive.***

The Prophet is ordered to tell the polytheists: Call on your idols to help you against me. Contrive against me and do not spare or respite me. My Lord will help me and deflect your plot from me. He is the One Who has sent down the Book to guide the people with it. He looks after His righteous servants and assists them. He has promised: *My righteous servants shall inherit the earth* (21:105), and I am among the righteous, so He will certainly support me. As with the gods that you worship beside God, they cannot help you nor themselves, do not hear nor see, and have

no power nor knowledge.

The command given to the Prophet in these verses implies that he is one of *al-ṣāliḥīn* (the righteous). This is a title that has not been affirmed for any other prophet in the Qur'an. In these verses, the Prophet challenges the idols and their worshipers, just as the previous prophets did with their nations.

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Examining Narrations

(1) Once al-Maʾmūn asked Imam al-Riḍā: "What is the meaning of the verse: *Then when He gave them a healthy [child], they ascribed partners to Him in what He had given them* (7:190)?" The Imam explained: "Eve gave birth 500 times, each time being twins: one boy and one girl. Adam and Eve prayed to God and made a covenant with Him, saying: *If You give us a healthy [child], we will be surely grateful* (7:189). *Then when He gave them* ṣāliḥ (lit. righteous), meaning complete in creation and free from defects and illness, the two classes of male and female children ascribed partners to God in what they were given by Him. These two classes [of Adam and Eve's children] were not grateful to God as their parents were." Al-Maʾmūn said, "I bear witness that you are truly the son of God's Messenger."[1]

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Author's comment: This hadith matches some of the above explanations for the verse suggested by other exegetes.

Some commentaries have narrated other accounts here—on the authority of Samarat b. Jundab, Abū Zayd and Ibn ʿAbbās—saying that all children of Adam and Eve used to die in infancy. Then Satan told them—or told Eve only—that if they want their child to live, they should name the child ʿAbd al-Ḥārith (lit. servant of Ḥārith), where Ḥārith was Satan's name in the heavens. According to some narrations, he suggested ʿAbd al-Shams (lit. servant of the sun). There are other narrations which say that Satan threatened Eve that she would give birth to a camel, a cow, or some other beast, unless she named the child ʿAbd al-Ḥārith, in which case it would be a healthy human baby. However, all these narrations are either fully fabricated or partially distorted based on imports from Jewish

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1 *Al-ʿUyūn*, via its chain of narration, on the authority of Abū al-Ṣalt al-Harawī.

sources (called *isrāʾīliyyāt*).[1]

(2) One of the Imams said: The *shirk* (polytheism, association) of those two [Adam and Eve] was associating others [with God] in *ṭāʿah* (obedience) not in *ʿibādah* (worship, service).[2]

Author's comment: This narration is apparently among the same group of [fabricated] narrations, and should be treated in the same way. It does not make sense to distinguish between *ṭāʿah* (obedience) and *ʿibādah* (worship, service), especially in the case of Satan, for God says: *Did I not exhort you, O children of Adam, saying, "Do not serve Satan. He is indeed your manifest enemy, but Worship Me"?* (36:60-61).[3] Nonetheless, some exegetes have maintained that these narrations only imply association (*shirk*) at the level of naming, which entails neither disbelief nor sin. This is al-Ṭabarī's view.

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1 In the Islamic literature, the word *isrāʾīliyyāt* is almost always used with a negative connotation, referring to distorted and incorrect accounts that Muslims have adopted from Jewish scholars. They are often narrated from Jewish or Christian converts to Islam. It should be noted, however, that the Qur'an rejects neither the previous scriptures nor their scholars altogether. It describes itself as a confirmation of the previous books (2:40, 2:89, 2:91, 2:97, 2:101, 3:3, 4:47, 5:48, 6:92, 35:31, 46:12, 46:31), and refers the people to the scholars of previous religions to verify its truth (2:121, 6:114, 10:94, 13:36, 16:43, 21:7, 46:10; also see 2:76, 2:144, 3:113-115, 5:43-47, 5:82-85, 6:93, 7:145, 7:154, 11:17, 26:197, 28:48-49, 28:52-55). Therefore, the fact that a certain account or view is found in Jewish sources does not prove that it is wrong or un-Islamic. It could be that both are true, and have stemmed from the same root of revelation. A comparative study of any two scriptures—especially Abrahamic ones—suffices to show how similar they are. One would then realize that these teachings are streams that trace to the same fountain. Hence, saying that a certain account is *isrāʾīlī* is not a decisive argument to prove its invalidity. In the above case, the reported narrations should be discarded because they contravene the Qur'an, not because they are rooted in Jewish teachings. (Trans.)

2 *Majmaʿ al-bayān*, on the authority of *Tafsīr al-ʿAyyāshī*.

3 The author's argument here is based on some narrations which say that what is meant here by "worshiping Satan" is obeying his commands and temptations. In other words, *ʿibādah* is the same as *ṭāʿah* (obedience), because *ʿibādah* (worship, service) is not meant in a ritualistic sense. (Trans.)

Verses 199-206

خُذِ الْعَفْوَ وَ أْمُرْ بِالْعُرْفِ وَ أَعْرِضْ عَنِ الْجاهِلِينَ ﴿١٩٩﴾ وَ إِمَّا يَنْزَغَنَّكَ مِنَ
الشَّيْطانِ نَزْغٌ فَاسْتَعِذْ بِاللَّهِ إِنَّهُ سَمِيعٌ عَلِيمٌ ﴿٢٠٠﴾ إِنَّ الَّذِينَ اتَّقَوْا إِذا مَسَّهُمْ
طائِفٌ مِنَ الشَّيْطانِ تَذَكَّرُوا فَإِذا هُمْ مُبْصِرُونَ ﴿٢٠١﴾ وَ إِخْوانُهُمْ يَمُدُّونَهُمْ فِي الْغَيِّ
ثُمَّ لا يُقْصِرُونَ ﴿٢٠٢﴾ وَ إِذا لَمْ تَأْتِهِمْ بِآيَةٍ قالُوا لَوْ لا اجْتَبَيْتَها قُلْ إِنَّما أَتَّبِعُ ما يُوحى
إِلَيَّ مِنْ رَبِّي هذا بَصائِرُ مِنْ رَبِّكُمْ وَ هُدىً وَ رَحْمَةٌ لِقَوْمٍ يُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿٢٠٣﴾ وَ إِذا قُرِئَ
الْقُرْآنُ فَاسْتَمِعُوا لَهُ وَ أَنْصِتُوا لَعَلَّكُمْ تُرْحَمُونَ ﴿٢٠٤﴾ وَ اذْكُرْ رَبَّكَ فِي نَفْسِكَ
تَضَرُّعاً وَ خِيفَةً وَ دُونَ الْجَهْرِ مِنَ الْقَوْلِ بِالْغُدُوِّ وَ الْآصالِ وَ لا تَكُنْ مِنَ
الْغافِلِينَ ﴿٢٠٥﴾ إِنَّ الَّذِينَ عِنْدَ رَبِّكَ لا يَسْتَكْبِرُونَ عَنْ عِبادَتِهِ وَ يُسَبِّحُونَهُ وَ لَهُ
يَسْجُدُونَ ﴿٢٠٦﴾

(7:199) *Cling to forgiveness, bid what is right, and turn away from the ignorant.*

(7:200) *Should a temptation from Satan disturb you, invoke the protection of Allah; indeed He is All-Hearing, All-Knowing.*

(7:201) *When those who are Godwary are touched by a visitation of Satan, they remember [Allah] and, behold: they perceive.*

(7:202) *But their brethren, they draw them into error, and they do not stop short.*

(7:203) *When you do not bring them a verse, they say, "Why do you not choose one?" Say, "I only follow what is revealed to me from my Lord; this is clear insight from your Lord, and a guidance and mercy for a people who have faith."*

(7:204) *When the Qur'ān is recited, listen to it and be silent, maybe you will receive [Allah's] mercy.*

(7:205) *And remember your Lord within your heart beseechingly and reverentially, without being loud, morning and evening, and do not be among the heedless.*

(7:206) *Indeed those who are [stationed] near your Lord do not disdain to worship Him. They glorify Him and prostrate to Him.*

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Introduction

These are the closing verses of the chapter, which take us back to the main theme and purpose for which the chapter was revealed. These verses command the Prophet to comport himself in a splendid manner, such that the hearts would be attracted to it, and the souls would find peace in it. The verses then order him to *tadhakkur* (mindfulness, adopting remembrance) [7:201], and finish by enjoining him to *dhikr* (remembrance) [7:205-206].

Commentary

خُذِ الْعَفْوَ وَ أْمُرْ بِالْعُرْفِ وَ أَعْرِضْ عَنِ الْجاهِلِينَ ﴿١٩٩﴾

(7:199) *Cling to* (khudh, from akhdh) *forgiveness, bid what is right, and turn away from the ignorant.*

Akhdh means "adhering to something" or "not letting go of it." Adhering to forgiveness means constantly overlooking the faults of one who does us wrong, and not seeking to exercise the right of retaliation—which the society grants to some of us [the oppressed] against others [the oppressor]. This instruction is applicable at a personal level, where one's own self is wronged and one's individual rights are violated. But sometimes the rights of others are violated through wronging a specific person. In such cases, forgiveness is not appropriate, because that would encourage the people to make mischief, would violate the rights of others even more, and would contravene the laws which hold the society together. Such forgiveness is against a myriad of verses which forbid injustice, corruption, assisting the oppressors, and inclining toward them. In fact, it would go against any verse that gives us the foundations of religious laws and injunctions. This should be clear.

Cling to forgiveness* (al-ʿafw)*…: Based on the above explanation, the Prophet should overlook the faults of others with respect to personal matters. And indeed this is how he lived. According to some narrations that we presented previously, the Prophet never took revenge on anyone

for himself.[1]

The above is how most exegetes have interpreted the verse, where ʿ*afw* is interpreted synonymously with *maghfirah* (forgiveness, pardon, excuse). In some narrations from Imam al-Ṣādiq, which we shall see below, ʿafw is interpreted as following a balanced and middle course (*wasaṭ*). This is more appropriate here, and more inclusive in terms of meaning. One problem with the first interpretation is that it renders the third command in the verse repetitious: *turn away from the ignorant*.

***… bid what is right* (al-ʿurf)…:** ʿ*Urf* and *maʿrūf* are cognates of *maʿrifah* (knowledge) and ʿ*arafa* (to know, to recognize). They indicate any custom or practice that is known, recognized and acknowledged to be good and commendable by the rational members of a society. Their opposite would be *munkar* (unknown, unrecognized, repudiated), which refers to uncommon and unconventional acts that are foreign to collective reason.

One who commands others to something must observe that command themselves. In this case, what is commanded is to follow *al-ʿurf* (the good, the right) [in an unconditional form]. Moreover, the person's act of commanding others should itself be an example of *al-ʿurf*. It cannot be performed in an inappropriate and detestable way (*munkar*). Therefore, by implication, *bid what is right* means that the Prophet must enjoin all good deeds,[2] and his very act of enjoinment should not be done in a wrong or unbefitting manner.

… and turn away from the imprudent: This is a command to show tolerance and moderation with ignorant and foolish individuals. That is the most effective way of neutralizing their imprudent behavior, and the most beautiful way of avoiding their harm. If one meets the foolish act of the other side with an equally imprudent reaction, it will only encourage the other side to continue and persist in their imprudence, error and perversity.

وَ إِمَّا يَنْزَغَنَّكَ مِنَ الشَّيْطانِ نَزْغٌ فَاسْتَعِذْ بِاللَّهِ إِنَّهُ سَمِيعٌ عَلِيمٌ ﴿٢٠٠﴾

(7:200) *Should a temptation* (nazgh) *from Satan disturb you*

1 This is part of the author's discussion at the end of Sūrah al-Māʾidah (Chapter 5). See volume 12 (1st ed.), p. 143 of the English translation. (Trans.)

2 Another possible translation for this part is: "The Prophet should live up to all good commands…" (Trans.)

(yanzaghannaka), ***invoke the protection of Allah; indeed He is All-Hearing, All-Knowing.***

There are three suggested meanings for the word *nazgh*: (1). According to al-Rāghib, it means "interfering in something in order to ruin it." The Qur'an says [narrating from Prophet Joseph]: *after that Satan had incited ill feeling* (nazagha) *between me and my brothers* (12:100). (2) It means "disturbing and stirring someone [to unwholesome reaction]," and it is most commonly used when someone is angry. (3) When used as an act of Satan, it means "the slightest temptation." These three definitions are quite similar. The most pertinent one to this verse is the second meaning, in the light of the last verse, where the Prophet is ordered to turn away from the imprudent. The unwise behavior of ignorant individuals is a form of Satan's interference, intended to arouse one to anger and persuade one to behave unwisely in like manner. Meanwhile, the verse's message is universal. It is addressed to the Prophet, but the real audience of the verse is his nation since he is infallible [to Satan's insinuations].

The meaning is: Whenever Satan tries to unsettle you and stir you to anger through the misbehavior and imprudence of ignorant individuals, seek refuge with God, for *indeed He is All-Hearing, All-Knowing*.

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ اتَّقَوْا إِذا مَسَّهُمْ طائِفٌ مِنَ الشَّيْطانِ تَذَكَّرُوا فَإِذا هُمْ مُبْصِرُونَ ﴿٢٠١﴾

(7:201) ***When those who are Godwary are touched by a visitation of Satan*** **(ṭāʾif min al-shayṭān)**, ***they remember [Allah]*** **(tadhakkarū)** ***and, behold: they perceive.***

This verse serves to explain and justify the command in the last verse. A *ṭāʾif* of Satan means a devil who circumambulates (*yaṭūfu*) around one's heart in order to instill some evil temptation in it. It could also mean the evil temptation which circumambulates the heart in order to enter it and settle in [as soon as the opportunity opens up]. In the first interpretation, the preposition *min* is descriptive (*bayāniyyah*), while in the second interpretation it is initiative (*nashwiyyah*).[1] Both interpretations reduce to the same meaning. *Tadhakkur* (remembrance) is a form of *tafakkur*

1 In the first case, the preposition *min* can be translated as "namely." The meaning would be: "A visitor, that is, Satan." In the second case, the preposition *min* can be translated as "from." The meaning would be: "A visitation coming and emerging from Satan." (Trans.)

(reflection, contemplation, thinking) that leads one to a conclusion that one was previously heedless of or ignorant about.

The meaning is: Should Satan ever stir and tempt you [to react imprudently, out of anger], seek refuge in God, for that is the way of the Godwary. Whenever a visitation of Satan touches them, they immediately remember that God is their Lord: they belong to Him; He takes care of them; and all their affairs are in His hands. Since they defer all their affairs to their Lord, He suffices them of Satan's burden, deflects his plot from them, and removes the veil of heedlessness from them. Thus they perceive, for their sights are not blocked by the veil of inadvertence.

As one can see, this verse is very comparable to the verse: *Indeed he [Satan] does not have any authority over those who have faith and put their trust in their Lord* (16:99). This shows that *istiʿādhah* (seeking refuge with God, invoking God's protection) is a form of trust and reliance on God (*tawakkul*). Furthermore, we can deduce that *istiʿādhah* is also a form of remembrance of God (*tadhakkur*), because the essence of *istiʿādhah* is the realization that God—Who is our Lord—is the only source of refuge for us, Who can protect us against our aggressive adversary [that is, Satan], despite any power that he may have.[1]

وَ إِخْوانُهُمْ يَمُدُّونَهُمْ فِي الغَيِّ ثُمَّ لا يُقْصِرُونَ ﴿٢٠٢﴾

(7:202) ***But their brethren, they draw them into error, and they do not***

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1 One defining element of Satan's reality is short-sightedness. He saw Adam's body being made of dust, but did not see beyond that, his soul which was God's breath. This is at the core of misguidance and error proper: lacking mindfulness of the divine breath in everything. Satanic temptation is any clinging—through either desire or aversion—which gets us caught up with the particulars, and veiled from the Universal. The verse's solution to this is the same as the solution offered in all schools of spirituality: to remember the Absolute Reality which underlies, pervades, and upholds all phenomena. The word "behold" (*fa-idhā*) at the end of the verse is also significant. It indicates an immediate realization and awareness. This is another practical insight shared by all schools of meditation: No *struggle* or *effort* is needed to remove the veil of inadvertence. Bring in the light of mindfulness, and darkness will disappear on its own accord. *They remember [Allah] and, behold, they perceive* (7:201). This should also clarify the privative and non-existential nature of the evil principle. (Trans.)

***stop short* (yuqṣirūna, from iqṣār).**

The pronoun "their" refers to the polytheists. The brothers of the polytheists would be the devils, as per the verse: *Indeed the squanderers are brothers of the devils* (17:27). *Iqṣār* means "to stop, to restrain, to withdraw." The last pronoun "they" can refer to either the devils or the polytheists. This verse is apparently a *ḥāliyyah* sentence.[1]

The meaning is: Whereas the Godwary have such state of remembrance and perception [mentioned in the last verse], the polytheists are constantly drawn into error by their brethren—the devils. The devils do not withhold or hesitate to propel the polytheists in that direction (or the polytheists do not stop and withdraw from their error).

وَ إِذا لَمْ تَأْتِهِمْ بِآيَةٍ قالُوا لَوْ لا اجْتَبَيْتَها قُلْ إِنَّما أَتَّبِعُ ما يُوحى إِلَيَّ مِنْ رَبِّي هذا بَصائِرُ مِنْ رَبِّكُمْ وَ هُدىً وَ رَحْمَةٌ لِقَوْمٍ يُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿٢٠٣﴾

(7:203) ***When you do not bring them a verse, they say, "Why do you not choose one* (ijtabaytahā, from ijtibāʾ)*?" Say, "I only follow what is revealed to me from my Lord; this is clear insight from your Lord, and a guidance and mercy for a people who have faith."***

This verse narrates a mocking speech from the polytheists. Given the context, the verse is effectively saying: If you present them with some verse, they deny it. And if you do not recite any verse to them—as in times when there is some delay or interruption in revelation—they complain and say, "Why don't you assemble one of those things which you call 'a divine verse' by pick-and-choosing from here and there?"

The imperative *Say* implies that revelation is not something that is up to the Prophet. The word *ijtibāʾ* is from the root *jibāyah*, following the verbal pattern *iftiʿāl*.[2]

… this is clear insight from your Lord…: God wants you to gain insight by means of this Book. The demonstrative pronoun "this" refers to the

1 This means that the particle *wāw* at the beginning of the sentence should be translated as "while, whereas." (Trans.)

2 *Jibāyah* is used for tax and tribute. *Ijtibāʾ* is to collect and gather tax and tribute. It is also used for harvesting crops. The verbal pattern *iftiʿāl* shows that the verb is performed with attention, purpose and intention. In this case, what is meant is "to choose selectively, to cherry-pick." (Trans.)

Qur'an.

وَ إِذا قُرِئَ الْقُرْآنُ فَاسْتَمِعُوا لَهُ وَ أَنْصِتُوا لَعَلَّكُمْ تُرْحَمُونَ ﴿٢٠٤﴾

(7:204) ***When the Qur'ān is recited, listen to it and be silent*** **(anṣitū, from inṣāt)**, ***maybe you will receive [Allah's] mercy.***

Inṣāt means "being silent and listening," or "listening with silence." When one listens to a speech while being silent, it is said: *anṣata al-ḥadīth* or *anṣata lil-ḥadīth*. When one is silent, it is said: *anṣata al-rajul*. When one is made silent by someone else, it is said: *anṣatahu ghayruhu*. What is meant here is: Give ear to the Qur'an and be silent.

The verse indicates a general meaning, although some have said that it was revealed with reference to [the recitation of the Qur'an in] the congregational prayer in particular.

وَ اذْكُرْ رَبَّكَ فِي نَفْسِكَ تَضَرُّعاً وَ خِيفَةً وَ دُونَ الْجَهْرِ مِنَ الْقَوْلِ بِالْغُدُوِّ وَ الْآصالِ وَ لا تَكُنْ مِنَ الْغافِلِينَ ﴿٢٠٥﴾

(7:205) ***And remember your Lord within your heart beseechingly*** **(taḍarruʿan)** ***and reverentially*** **(khīfatan)**, ***without being loud, morning and evening, and do not be among the heedless.***

This verse classifies *dhikr* (remembrance, invocation) into two types: (1) *within your heart*; (2) *without being loud*.[1] The verse enjoins both types of *dhikr*. Loud *dhikr* is not mentioned here, not because it is not a type of *dhikr*, but because it is against the courtesy and proper manners of servitude. This can be inferred from the following Prophetic narration:

Once he was on a military expedition with his Companions. It was a pitch-black night when they entered a vast wilderness. Some of the Prophet's Companions started shouting *Allāhu akbār* (God is greater, God is greatest). The Prophet stopped them and said, "The One you are calling is neither far nor absent."[2]

Taḍarruʿ is derived from *ḍarāʿah*, which means "blandishment with a sense of humility and humbleness." *Khīfah* is a special type of *khawf* (fear,

1 The first one is inward invocation, without verbal utterance. The second one is whispered in an undertone. (Trans.)

2 This narration is paraphrased. (Auth.)

awe). What is meant here is a kind of fear that befits the sacred precinct of God. *Taḍarruᶜ* (beseeching, entreaty) implies inclination, interest, and seeking nearness toward One Whom one beseeches. *Khīfah* (fear) implies viewing the other side with awe, holding oneself back, and keeping a distance. Therefore, a remembrance that is based on both of these qualities implies having an inner orientation both toward and away from God. Such is the case of one who loves something and also fears it. The person would draw toward the thing due to their love, and would draw away from it due to their awe.

God is pure good, and there is no evil to be found in Him. Any evil that reaches us emanates from our own deficiency. God is the Possessor of both majesty and grace (*Dhū al-jalāl wa al-ikrām*). He has some names of beauty (*asmāʾ al-jamāl*) which attract everything toward Him, and some names of majesty (*asmāʾ al-jalāl*) which repel and dominate all things. Doing justice to God's remembrance is to remember all His most excellent names, which include both His names of beauty and His names of majesty. This amounts to remembering God with hope and fear both: *beseechingly and reverentially*.

… morning and evening…: Apparently this is a qualification for the second type of remembrance: *without being loud*. In other words, verbal remembrance is classified into remembrance in the mornings and in the evenings, which would correspond to some of the obligatory daily prayers.[1]

… and do not be among the heedless: This prohibition emphasizes and reiterates the command to remember God at the beginning of the verse. God does not forbid heedlessness altogether, but forbids being among the heedless, meaning those who are deeply rooted in heedlessness and can be identified by it. Based on this, one should not let heedlessness settle in one's heart. One should remember one's Lord frequently, moment after another. And if one ever becomes heedless or forgetful, one should immediately recover and remember Him again [as one regains awareness].[2] This is the

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1 Another possibility is that morning and evening is another way of saying, "all the time." This notion is found with slight variations in many verses in the Qur'an. Therefore, the qualification applies to remembrance in general. The verse is ordering us to always be mindful of God, whether verbally or inwardly. (Trans.)

2 Since God is timeless, remembering Him entails coming back to the present and feeling the moment. (Trans.)

sense of remembrance which is desired and ordered here. The next verse confirms this meaning, as we shall see presently.

In short, the verse commands two things: (1) constant remembrance of God in one's heart with entreaty and awe moment after moment; (2) verbal remembrance of God without being loud in the mornings and evenings.

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ عِنْدَ رَبِّكَ لا يَسْتَكْبِرُونَ عَنْ عِبادَتِهِ وَ يُسَبِّحُونَهُ وَ لَهُ يَسْجُدُونَ ﴿٢٠٦﴾

(7:206) ***Indeed those who are [stationed] near your Lord do not disdain to worship Him. They glorify Him and prostrate to Him.***

The flow and connection of the verses would suggest that this verse is a justification for the command in the last verse. The meaning would be: Remember your Lord as it was said in the last verse *because* those who are with your Lord do as it is said here. Remember Him in order to be among those who are near your Lord, and not be excluded from them.

… those who are [stationed] near your Lord…: Given the above connection, what is meant here is not limited to the angels, unlike what most exegetes have said. It does not make sense to command the Prophet [as a human] to remember God in a certain way *because* the angels do so. Rather, what is meant here is anyone who is near God. This is inferred from the phrase *ʿinda Rabbika* (with your Lord, before your Lord), which implies presence as opposed to absence.

The connection between the two verses also shows that one's degree of nearness to God is as much as one's remembrance of Him. It is mindfulness which removes the veil from between a servant and their Lord. Otherwise, all beings have an equal relation to God, without any difference in terms of nearness, distance and so on.[1]

… do not disdain to worship Him. They glorify Him and prostrate to Him: These are three qualities which can apply to both inward remembrance with the heart, and verbal remembrance with the tongue. Just as these descriptions are used with reference to verbal remembrance and physical action, they can describe the states of the heart. The heart can be: (1) in a state of not being arrogant; (2) in a state of glorifying God; (3)

1 In other words, from the point of view of God, He is impartial and equidistant from all beings. The difference is on the part of the beings, which may not realize the nearness and presence of the Absolute due to their veil of inadvertence. (Trans.)

in a state of prostration and utter humbleness. Glorification (*tasbīḥ*) and prostration (*sujūd*) are not necessarily performed by physical organs like the tongue and the limbs, because the Qur'an says: *There is not a thing but celebrates His praise* (17:44); *and the herb and the tree prostrate [to Allah]* (55:6); *To Allah prostrates whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth* (16:49).

The three conditions given in this verse—clearance from pride, glorification, and prostration—are lighter and easier than what is mentioned elsewhere: *and those who are near Him do not disdain to worship Him, nor do they become weary. They glorify [Him] night and day, and they do not flag* (21:19-20); *But if they disdain [the worship of Allah], those who are near your Lord glorify Him night and day, and they are not wearied* (41:38). These other verses apparently talk about incessant involvement [in worship and glorification] without any stop or any engagement with other things. The current verses of discussion, however, only prohibit the establishment of heedlessness in the heart, as we discussed above [under verse 7:205]. Therefore, the current verses order a stage of mindfulness which is below the stage discussed in Chapters 21 and 41. God is the Knower.

Examining Narrations

(1) Imam al-Ṣādiq said: God disciplined His Messenger by saying: *Cling to forgiveness (*al-ʿafw*), bid what is right, and turn away from the ignorant* (7:199). That is, take from them what is apparent and straightforward.[1] *ʿAfw* means *wasaṭ* (middle, balance).[2]

(2) The Messenger of God said: "Indeed the noble moral traits in God's view are: (1) forgiving one who wrongs you; (2) connecting with one who disconnects from you; (3) giving to one who deprives you." Then the Prophet recited: *Cling to forgiveness, bid*

1 This could be interpreted in two ways: (1) Deal with the people only based on their appearance, without investigating the real truth about their lives and personalities. This amounts to moderation and lenience. (2) With regards to taxes, donations and charity, do not levy anything burdensome on the people, but take from them what is readily available. (Trans.)

2 *Tafsīr al-ʿAyyāshī*, on the authority of al-Ḥasan b. ʿAlī b. Nuʿmān, on the authority of his father, on the authority of someone who heard this form the Imam.

what is right, and turn away from the ignorant (7:199).[1]

Author's comment: There are numerous Prophetic narrations to this effect, reported through Sunni chains of transmission.

(3) Ibrāhīm b. Adham said: When God revealed: *Cling to forgiveness, bid what is right, and turn away from the ignorant* (7:199), the Messenger of God said, "I have been commanded to cling to forgiveness in face of people's manners[2] and behavior."[3]

(4) When the verse, *Cling to forgiveness, bid what is right, and turn away from the ignorant* (7:199) was revealed, the Messenger of God said, "My Lord, how should I do this despite anger?" Then God revealed the verse: *Should a temptation from Satan disturb you…* (7:200).[4]

Author's comment: This narration is somewhat problematic, although it can be explained and justified with what we discussed in our exposition of the verse.

(5) Concerning verse 7:200 *Tafsīr al-Qummī* says: Should there arise in your heart any temptation or anything from Satan, seek refuge in God, for indeed He is All-Hearing, All-Knowing.

(6) Jābir b. ʿAbd-Allāh says: I heard the Messenger of God recite[5] verse 7:201 with the word *ṭāʾif*.[6]

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1 *Al-Durr al-manthūr*, on the authority of Ibn Mardawayh, on the authority of Anas.

2 This amounts to tolerance and patience with people's unrefined behavior. An alternative translation would be: "I have been commanded to cling to forgiveness among all moral traits which are common among the people." That would emphasize forgiveness as a salient virtue, but not the only one. (Trans.)

3 *Al-Durr al-manthūr*, on the authority of Ibn Abī al-Dunyā's *Makārim al-akhlāq*.

4 *Al-Durr al-manthūr*, on the authority of Ibn Jarīr, on the authority of Ibn Zayd.

5 This is the common recitation and recording of the verse. The author discussed two possible and effectively equivalent meanings for *ṭāʾif* in his exposition of the verse. An alternative recitation is with the word *ṭayf* (written without the letter *alif*), which means "anger." (Trans.)

6 *Al-Durr al-manthūr*, on the authority of Ibn Mardawayh.

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(7) Once Imam al-Ṣādiq was asked about the verse: *when touched by a visitation of Satan, they remember [Allah] and, behold: they perceive* (7:201). He said: That is when a servant intends to commit a sin, but then they become mindful and thus abstain. That is the meaning of: *they remember and, behold: they perceive* (7:201).[1]

Author's comment: There are more narrations to this effect.

(8) Once the Prophet was praying, and some people who were praying behind him also recited [the Qur'an with him]. Thus God revealed: *When the Qur'ān is recited, listen to it and be silent* (7:204).[2]

Author's comment: There is a number of narrations here, reported through Sunni chains of transmission. Some narrations say that people used to speak with each other while praying behind the Prophet, and that is when the verse was revealed. Other narrations say that it was one young man from the Anṣār (Medinan Supporters). Other narrations simply say, "a man."

(9) Imam al-Bāqir said: This verse was revealed concerning congregational prayer behind an imam (leader of congregation).[3]

(10) Imam al-Ṣādiq said: It is obligatory to be silent when the Qur'an is recited in the prayer and outside the prayer.[4]

(11) According to another version, the Imam added at the end: Whenever the Qur'an is recited in your presence, you must be quiet and listen.[5]

(12) Once ʿAbd-Allāh b. Abī Yaʿfūr asked Imam al-Ṣādiq: "Sometimes while I am praying, someone recites the Qur'an. Is it obligatory on

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1 *Al-Kāfī*, via its chain of narration, on the authority of Abū Baṣīr. Al-ʿAyyāshī has also narrated this in three ways: (1) on the authority of Abū Baṣīr; (2) on the authority of ʿAlī b. Abī Ḥamzah; (3) on the authority of Zayd b. Abī Usāmah. The first two narrations say: "That is a person who intends to sin, but then becomes mindful and thus abstains." The third one says: "That is a sin which one resolves to commit, but then they become mindful and abstain."

2 *Al-Durr al-manthūr*, on the authority of Ibn Mardawayh, on the authority of Ibn ʿAbbās.

3 *Majmaʿ al-bayān*.

4 *Majmaʿ al-bayān*.

5 *Tafsīr al-ʿAyyāshī*, on the authority of Zurārah.

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me to be quiet and listen?" He said, "Indeed. Whenever the Qur'an is being recited, it is incumbent on you to be quiet and listen."[1]

(13) Imam al-Ṣādiq said: Once when Imam ʿAlī was praying, Ibn al-Kawwāʾ recited: *If you ascribe a partner to Allah your works shall fail and you shall surely be among the losers* (39:65). The Imam stopped reciting [and listened].[2]

Author's comment: The narrations which command being quiet outside the prayer are interpreted as giving a recommended rule (*istiḥbāb*). A complete discussion of this should be pursued in Islamic law.[3]

(14) ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb says: Once the Messenger of God came to me, and I could see sorrow in his face. He grabbed my beard and said: "*Indeed we belong to God, and to Him we return* (2:156). Gabriel just came to me and said: '*Indeed we belong to God, and to Him we return* (2:156)'.

I told him, 'Of course *we belong to God, and to Him we return* (2:156), but what makes you say this, Gabriel?'[4]

'Your nation will fall into temptation after you due to little of this world, not with much.'

I asked, 'Will they fall into *kufr* (disbelief, heresy) or *ḍalāl* (error, straying, misguidance)?'

'Both shall occur,' Gabriel replied.

'How shall that happen while I am leaving the Book of God among them?'

He said, 'They will go astray by means of the Book of God. And that will begin with their reciters and rulers. The rulers will deprive people of their rights and will refuse to pay them [what is their due] so the people will start killing one another. And the

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1 *Tafsīr al-ʿAyyāshī*.

2 *Tafsīr al-ʿAyyāshī*, on the authority of Abū Kahmash.

3 In other words, what is obligatory from a purely legal point of view is to remain silent when one is a follower in a congregational prayer, with respect to the leader's recitation. Staying quiet in all other circumstances is recommended. It goes without saying that observing purely legal obligations is not a sufficient condition for spiritual growth, salvation and paradise. (Trans.)

4 The verse is commonly recited at times of calamity and misfortune, as a means of inspiring perseverance and reliance on God. (Trans.)

reciters will follow the desires of the rulers: *they draw them into error, and they do not stop short* (7:202).'
I asked, 'O Gabriel, how can anyone among them remain safe and secure [from these temptations]?'
'Through abstinence and patience,' he said. 'If they are given what belongs to them, they take it; and if they are denied their right, they leave it.'"[1]

(15) Concerning *those who are [stationed] near your Lord* (7:206) *Tafsīr al-Qummī* says: This refers to the prophets, the messengers and the Imams.

The end. All praise be to Almighty God.

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1 *Al-Durr al-manthūr*, on the authority of al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī.